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The Shooting

A Novel Of The Border Country

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

Buck Mabry rode a little ahead of his brother Mike, crossing Camel Back Ridge in the Block M west pasture. So he saw Tess Howard loping her Half-Hat pinto up the slope before Mike knew that the girl was close to them. Buck watched her admiringly. Big Bill Howard's daughter was small, and as yellow of hair and blue of eyes as Buck himself. And pretty . . . Buck told himself, now, that Tess was at *least* pretty.

"Comes Tess," he said at last, without looking toward his big, swaggering elder brother. "She must've rode by the house and asked Wo Li where we was."

"Asked him where *we* was?" Mike grunted scornfully. He reined around to tower above Buck. "You wouldn't *hooraw*

Buck shot Sonora Awe out of the saddle.

Buck Mabry Figured He Was About Through Being A Kid Brother. When He Picked Sonora Awe To Try His Growing Pains On, The Whole Border Knew A Man Was Being Born

yourself about that, now, would you? Tess just can't stay away from my fatal beauty, son. Gals are like that, around me. Why, the last time I was up at Fort Worth, I had to buy a dog!"

He waved casually to the heiress of the adjoining Half-Hat outfit.

"Hi, Cotton Top!" he greeted Tess. "Bring that billy goat up close and le' me inspect the brand. Still got just half a hat on him, huh? Well, likely Buck stole the other half of the Howard hat. He's getting along in years, now. Thinking about wearing him a hat, instead of a cute li'l' redbill cap."

Buck reddened as Tess pulled in the pinto that wore upon its spotted hip the Half-Hat iron of Big Bill Howard, the brand which made Mike's standard, rather clumsy, joke.

Tess glanced from Buck to the big man swaggering in his carven saddle. She laughed.

"Will you quit hoorawing the boy? Buck's all right. I have been fond of him ever since he was born. I remember giving him one of my best second-hand rattles that day, to keep him quiet. You remember, Mike."

"Yah!" Buck told her. "You wasn't six months old, yourself. Mike was just getting out of diapers."

"Ah, but I was big for my age," Mike grinned. "And *smart!* I'll never forget

the day you was born, Buck. Pa whaled hell out of me because I found his quart in the harness room and drunk it on him, then stole his pet pipe and his saddle and started for town. They don't raise men like me, in the Mabry family, no more. Too bad, too—country could use 'em."

Then he looked off across Block M and his face hardened. He spoke to Buck in his usual bullying tone:

"Ne' mind all the young gabble, now. We have got to find that Sultan stallion and his menathy if *you* bed down on the range tonight. That old He's worth a heap more'n you stack up. By hisself. And if we was to count in twenty head of Block M mares, you and all your get wouldn't make the trade for the band. Come on, Tess! You and me will head for Red Rock. Buck, you make a *paseo* up to the Half-Hat line fence. I wouldn't put it past Sultan to hide out in the cedar brakes. He would, if he thought it'd bother me any."

Tess looked quick and hard at Mike and shook her head:

"Uh-uh! I'm going with Buck. I was just rambling around, anyway. I'll be on the way home, if I ride with him."

Mike shrugged his big shoulders and his grin flashed. But there was no smile in his narrowed blue eyes.

"Suit yourself!" he told her carelessly. "No accounting for funny tastes. You better peel your eyes, now, Buck. Pa lands back here from Kansas, and finds you let Sultan go off and lose twenty of his prize mares, he will bodaciously cut the liver out of you with a quirt. For all you're nineteen years old, and think you're 'most a big boy!"

Buck stared at the belligerent face. Whether it was the presence of Tess, or simply the outcome of much brooding over Mike's manner toward him, and his father's contemptuous way of treating him, he had no idea. Nor did he consider it that way. He was nearly twenty; it was time to call a halt on certain things. That was all he knew.

He was strangely calm about it. So he merely sat and looked steadily at Mike until the big man scowled under the level stare. Then Buck grinned mirthlessly:

"Oh, no! He won't do any such thing. As a matter of fact, he's a lot more likely to take the price of the harem out of your pay. For I'm not supposed to do your work and mine on the place, just because Pa left you in charge. And no man'll put the weight of his finger on me without finding out something. I'll ride up to the fence, if you're going to Red Rock. I'll do my share of the riding on the Block M, but don't try shoving it all onto me, hereafter."

Mike stared incredulously at him and his big hand closed on the leather of his bridle reins until the knuckles shone. But Tess pushed into the scene quickly.

"Let's be going, Buck!" she said a little breathlessly.

And Mike whirled the big, golden gelding, twin brother of the missing Sultan. He sent him racing down the slope of Camel Back like a centaur, horse and man seeming welded into one magnificent moving statue.

"Ah, don't bother about him," Tess consoled Buck. "Mike's a big man and he knows it. Sometimes he's just — just a little hard to get along with. He likes his own way."

"*You're* trying to tell *me* about Mike's peculiarities?" Buck demanded, contemptuously. "It happens that I've suffered from him all my life. He's about as good a man —and cowman—as you'll find between the Rio Grande and Milk River. Almost as good as Pa or Big Bill Howard. The trouble's not with Mike, really, it's with the men that let him ride over 'em roughshod. He's been under my hide like a cockleburr for too long, now."

"I know!" she nodded and there was an absent expression on her face. "I know plenty about Mike. He never has met a

man who could match him at any kind of fighting. All his life he's got everything he wanted—or almost everything. He can't stand being crossed. I know!"

Buck puzzled over her odd, faraway manner as they rode toward the line fence. He kept mechanical watch for sign of Sultan. It was a matter of common understanding in Bono County—particularly on the Block M and Half-Hat outfits—that one day Mike Mabry and Tess Howard would marry. Now, Tess's way of speaking made him wonder if she and Mike had fallen out. He leaned suddenly to put out a hand and cover hers on the saddle horn.

"Tess!" he said quickly, huskily. "I'm just about done with the Little Boy business. That means, done with the Block M. Pa and Mike run it by themselves and for themselves. I don't stack up with the punchers, even. If a Block M herd trails north, I go along only by accident, you might say. The way they treat me reminds me of the old storybooks we used to read, Tess. You know, the old king always had two sons. The oldest son got everything on his lap, and the youngest got handed everything in the neck!"

She stared at him frowningly. Her hand was limp under his. She seemed puzzled.

"What in the world are you leading up to, Buck?" she demanded. "I feel sorry for you—"

"Nobody asked you to feel sorry!" he flared. "What I'm trying to get at is this: I can hold my own as a hand anywhere but on the Block M. And I'm going to be taken for a hand from now on. Mike— Did he tell you about the Mexican who was going to shoot him from behind, in Bono, last month? Didn't, huh? No, he wouldn't! Well! I saw this chili-picker ready to lift his pistol and plug Big—Brother—Mike. And I beat Gonzalez to the draw and got him in the shoulder. Mike turned around and, when he saw that I had done the little trick, he had to say something to prove that I hadn't really done anything. So he wanted to know why I shot Gonzalez. He was just getting ready to knock Gonzalez's head off, so he said!"

His hand tightened on hers. The chunky Pigpen black was close to her pinto. Buck's shoulder was all but against hers. She was abruptly startled of expression.

"Tess, I reckon I've been crazy about you just all my life. If you could like me—"

"I do like you!" she said quickly. "I like you a lot! But I'm not in love with you. How could I be? Why, I'm six months older than you, Buck. And I don't believe you're really in love with me. It's just a notion. Two or three years from now you'll wonder how you ever thought about me."

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" Buck told her savagely. "I reckon I know how I feel. I haven't said anything because, until today, you've always acted like you were crazy about Mike. Now—"

"Look!" she cried tensely. "Look at the fence!"

Buck jerked his thoughts back to the business in hand. A whole section of the line fence was open, and it needed only the glance to tell that it had been cut, not knocked loose. The wire came up to a post taut; on the next post the four strands sagged acutely. Buck stared, then they spurred forward and pulled in at the gap. Buck examined the ground.

"It's Sultan and the mares," he said, slowly. "Heading across Half-Hat range. Come on. Let's see if I can follow the trail. There's an intoeing mare in the band that I can almost follow by feel!"

The trail began to angle eastward, on Big Bill Howard's range. Buck's intent young face began to wear a scowl. He shook his head after a while.

"Unless they mean to hit all those rocks on Owl Creek, then cut back north toward the Bono, I don't *sabe* it."

"You mean—that tough bunch at Rock's Ford?" the girl demanded, tensely. "Dad says they'll be to clean out, one day. Rock's been gathering some pretty hard cases around him—hard and mysterious. Look! They have gathered some more."

Buck nodded. He had already seen the horse tracks coming into the trail of the Block M *mañada*, to widen it and sweep forward toward the welter of rocky arroyos and hogbacks around Owl Creek.

"Look here! We'd better head for the house and see Big Bill," he said. "You do that and I'll hightail it to pick up Mike and Turkey French. We can meet the Half-Hat outfit here and go on. There'll be enough to split up; some can head for Rock's direct, while the others keep this trail."

She nodded and they whirled their horses. Buck retraced his road at the gallop. He came to Camel Back again and trailed Mike for a couple of miles. Then Mike's trail curved back toward the Block M house and it was here that Buck found him, very much at ease in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and a fried apple pie.

"Somebody's run off the menathy!" Buck yelled from the door. "Cut the line fence and pushed 'em across the Half-Hat. Picked up some of Howard's stuff on the way. Heading for Owl Creek—and for Rock's Ford at the end, I bet you. Hey, Wo Li! Better fix some chuck to carry. Tess went on to find Big Bill, Mike. We can meet the Half-Hat crowd on the trail. Where's Turkey? He said he'd be here by noon—"

"Set down!" Mike commanded, and went on eating. "Reckon I don't need you telling me what's to do. You hadn't let Sultan get in the west pasture, this wouldn't have happened. Hammer the triangle, Wo Li. Turkey's somewhere in hearing. Now, Buck, you trot out and shift my kak onto Two-Sock. And while me and Turkey are gone on this business—"

"What do you mean? You think I'm not going along?" Buck cried incredulously. "You think I'm going to stay here—"

"I don't *think* a thing about it," Mike grinned. "I *know* you're going to stay here! Now, hightail it and get that hull onto Two-Sock. Let's don't hear no more about it!"

Buck stood staring with red and furious face. Mike reached for another pie.

"Time we cleaned out that skunk den on Rock's Ford," he drawled, rather as if speaking to himself. "Ever since Rock bought that damn store, and the ford began to be a settlement, there's been too many hard cases a-living on air around there. Time to let some of 'em do a jig-dance on air. Now, Buck, likely this'll take two-three days. You move that bunch of she-stuff first thing tomorrow into the Little Pasture where Darcy can see 'em. He ought to've been out today. If he asks you anything, you tell him the truth—for you don't know a thing. Hightail, son, and get me Two-Sock saddled."

"Saddle your own horse, you big swell-head!" Buck snarled at him. "I swear! You're the only man I ever saw, that could strut sitting down! Go on to Rock's. And when you get back, I'll drag it. I've got thirty dollars and my Pigpen horse. Enough to ride on!"

He whirled away and Mike let him go without troubling to answer his threat. He was whistling, the last Buck heard.

TRAIL TO THE FORD

Turkey French was the news-bringer. He came back to the Block M when Buck had been two days alone, riding as if he came by way of Bono. He came up to the corral where Buck and Darcy the stock buyer were talking. His narrow dark face was twisted in a malicious grin.

"Well?" Buck demanded at last, when

the cowboy only sat with leg around the saddle horn and rolled a cigarette. "What happened at Rock's Ford?"

"Nothing," Turkey shrugged, and licked the edge of the brown cigarette paper. "Nothing a-tall. In fact—"

He got a match from his hatband. Dark little eyes went from Buck to fat Darcy. Buck knew that Turkey had a story to tell; and, since he was anxious to tell it, certainly the story was unpleasant.

"If you was to cut stick and rustle up a bunch of fellas to go some place and not do a solitary thing after they got there—done it a-purpose, you know—I bet you'd still have a lot of trouble beating our record at Rock's Ford. Of course, you not being along, Buck, maybe it was too much to hope we would get something done . . ."

Turkey said, sullenly. "Where we put him last night. We went up to Rock's Ford and looked over that whole layout. We had to give it up. Even Mike admitted there wasn't hide or hair of any of our stuff, nor no trail leading to the Ford. So Mike and Big Bill thought we'd better make a round by way of Bono to talk to Cad Yeo. Mike says even a sheriff like Cad might have read something in the newspaper. But seems like Cad was behind with his reading, or something. He didn't know the time of day. That was last night. We kind of circulated up and down. And Mike, he tangled ropes with Sonora Awe. I reckon you don't know him?"

He looked at Darcy, whose wide, red face remained blank, though green eyes

"You Know, I Don't Like The Way You Look"

Buck looked steadily at Turkey. In two days his determination to leave the Block M had only hardened.

"Wait a minute," he checked the cowboy, drawlingly. "If you have got something to tell, go ahead and tell it. You're a lot funnier, Turkey, when you don't realize it. We're not interested in what you think might have happened. What I want to know is, where's Mike?"

Turkey glared at him. He was very respectful to the heavy-handed Mike, but he had always rawhided "the Block M kid." He had never drawn from Buck this particular tone, before today. But Darcy interfered before he could answer Buck. And the fat, red-faced buyer was a man highly respected in Bono County, even by the hardest cases.

"Better spill it," Darcy said, impatiently. "You gabble like a damn old maid at a social, Turkey."

"Mike's in bed at Quincy Vetter's," narrowed thoughtfully. It was Buck who answered, in the same emotionless drawl that he had used from the beginning on Turkey.

"Of course I know him. Supposed to be a gunslinger from the hard water fork of Bitter Creek. He's been kind of dividing his time between Bono and Rock's Ford."

"It was in the Crystal," Turkey went on, addressing Darcy. "Sonora was at the bar when we come in. He begun laughing. Finally, Mike asked him what the joke was. Sonora laughed louder. Finally, he said he was just thinking of something he heard —he'd heard horses going toward the Ford. He asked Mike what we found and Mike, he blew up. He talked pretty rough and Sonora asked him if his papa knew he used language like that and—"

"We'll imagine what he said, and what Mike said," Buck broke in, dryly. "Tell the tale, Turkey!"

"Say!" the indignant Turkey yelled.

"Who you think you are, telling me what I can say and what I can't. Longtail pups—"

"Just what *I* was thinking!" Darcy said, acidly. "I swear, it takes you longer to say nothing, Turkey, than anybody I've run into lately. What happened?"

"Mike went for his gun, if you're in such a hellish hurry! But he was about a week too slow."

"He would be," Buck told Darcy, contemptuously. "Mike is as good a rifle-shot as ever came down the pike. But he needs notice in writing to get his belt-gun out, and he can't hit anything less than an elephant when he gets it out. And this is damn poor elephant country . . . So he met somebody tougher than he is. Did Aunt Eunice Vetter send for Tess to come in and nurse Mike?"

"I told her as I come by," Turkey nodded. His little eyes were calculatingly on Buck. "Now, Mike says I'm to take charge of the place, and he don't want to hear about you giving me trouble. Not that I need him to tell you—"

Buck looked at Darcy's expressionless face. The buyer was regarding him steadily —as he had been since the first exchange with Turkey. Buck grinned. But it was not a pleasant lip-stretching. He flexed his arms and moved in a little closer to the now-silent cowboy.

"Come on down, Turkey," he said, broodingly. "Come on down. You and me have some talking to get over. You know, Turkey, it just came to me like a flash that I don't like the way you stand. And I can get along without seeing you sit down. In fact, lying down is about the only way I want to look at you. Come on down, Turkey. I'm going to have a looky at you, the way I like to see you!"

"What?" Turkey yelled, incredulously. "You think you—"

He fell off on the other side of the horse as Buck jerked his leg and shoved. He landed on the point of a shoulder and rolled over, swearing angrily. Buck slid around the horse and waited, grinning tightly. Turkey gathered himself and ran with wild-swinging arms. There was no science on either side. But Turkey ran into a fist and sat down again. His nose spurted blood, and he was ill-advised about getting up again before his head was clear. Buck hammered him enthusiastically and sent him to the ground again. He was staring at Turkey when Darcy streaked in and kicked. Turkey's pistol spun through the air. Buck, turning suddenly cold, gaped incredulously before he flung himself on the little puncher and battered him, butted him, rolled him.

It was Darcy who checked the blind, savage attack which might have ended in Turkey's death from Buck's steely bare hands. The buyer's big fist rubbed Buck in the face. There was a ripple of husky laughter in his voice that penetrated the killing haze:

"Come on, now! Come on, son! He's a plumb, tee-total wreck. No point to killing him. Up you come! Buck! Buck!"

"All right!" Buck answered thickly, shaking his head. "I—I kind of forgot everything but him going for his gun knowing I was naked. I—I'll be all right now."

He got up, panting. Darcy cocked a critical eye at the limp figure on the ground, laughed again and turned toward the spring-fed water trough at the corral's corner. He came back with a canvas *morral* full of icy water and capsized it on Turkey. The little puncher spluttered, groaned, and blinked up at them. Darcy hunkered near him and began to make a cigarette. Turkey sat shakily with a hand propping him.

"I always suspicioned you for some brand of coyote," Darcy said conversationally. "And when you couldn't stand a fair razzmatazz, I knew my notions had been right. The only reason you're around now, sort of pole-catting the air up like you are, is—well, it's split down the mid-

dle, that reason: It was just as easy to kick that Colt out of your hand as it was to put a hole in you. And Buck quit before he killed you."

Turkey made mumbling sounds. His swollen mouth, and the front teeth he had lost, made his speech difficult to understand. Buck moved impatiently forward.

"Listen, Turkey!" he said sharply—forgetting momentarily the gentle drawl he had used before. "Mike's not giving powders on the Block M while I'm around. He's not running the rodeo, far's I'm concerned. He's going to lie back a spell and think about what I told him; about not being much of a muchness as a gunslick. Meanwhile, you go on about the work. Or—hightail it. I've got some things to look out for. I'm saddling right now to go do 'em. What do you want to do? Stick—and forget this? Or sling your roll?"

The mumblings seemed to indicate that Turkey would stick. In fact, he seemed altogether a chastened soul. Buck grunted to Darcy and motioned toward the house. The fat buyer trailed him, humming *Buffalo Gals*.

"Just came to me," Buck said drawlingly, "that I'm all caught up on a lot of things. Turkey's yow-yow, for one. I reckon you can talk to Mike, about the stuff in Little Pasture. That's not bothering me. But some other things are."

Darcy looked thoughtfully at him.

Buffalo Gals, can't you come out tonight,
Come out tonight, come out tonight?
Buffalo Gals, can't you come out tonight,
To dance in the light of the moon?

He fished in a pocket for a rat-tailed stogie and studied Buck while biting off the end. Buck gestured at the door of the kitchen, where wizened little Wo Li stood now.

"Leaving the place?" Darcy inquired.

"For the time being. It's my fault, in a way, that Sultan ever got into the west pasture. I'm going to have a looky at Rock's Ford."

"I wouldn't," Darcy said, with slow emphasis. "That's a rattler den, Buck. Rock is tough people and the whole pack of 'em around that settlement, men and women both, they are natural-born cottonwood berries—and eventually we'll have to disinfect that place with black powder and put the berries onto the cottonwoods where they belong."

When Buck only turned and moved toward the kitchen door, Darcy followed. He listened to Buck's curt orders to the little Chinese cook; watched him go on into the living quarters and come quickly back with a neat Winchester carbine and a shell belt from which dangled a holstered pistol.

"As I was saying," Darcy continued tonelessly, reaching for a doughnut from a pan beside the silent Wo Li, "it's a tough place, Rock's Ford. They expect two—no, *three* kinds of people: Tough customers of one kind or another, mostly on the dodge; and lawmen hunting 'em; and—folks they can strip! So when *you* hit Rock's Ford, Buck, it'll be a good notion to play sulky. Mike's made it too hot for you, on the Block M. You're setting up for yourself. Willing to be tough, but you ain't tough yet. Take some rawhiding from the older, harder men. But don't take too much! That's sort of hard to figure—how much is the right amount to take."

Buck nodded with a small frown, watching the buyer as he buckled on his shell belt and shifted the hang of the holster. He was puzzled. Darcy had no reputation as a talker. And now he acted—and talked—like a schoolteacher with a favorite scholar. And suddenly it dawned on Buck that he and the rest of Bono County really knew very little about the taciturn fat man, for all his twenty years in the neighborhood.

"I'm going to map out some things for

you," Darcy said slowly. "Know what a *Long Rider* is? Well, he goes by other names, like a hunted man. And he can tell one of his kind by certain words and signs; and know certain trademarks of certain men, all the way down the high lines from Jackson's Hole to Cananea. I'm going to show you some things you'll need to know—"

BOSS GUNFIGHTER

Buck still thought of the "lesson" given him by Darcy—and of the man himself—when he could look down a long slope to the Bono River and see the gray store at the crossing, with other weathered shacks peeping out of green foliage to right and left of Rock's long one-story building.

"He didn't learn all that—" Buck told himself of the buyer "—out of any book. Some time or other, Darcy rode the high lines himself. And—why, he must have known he was as good as telling me that, when he gave away all the signs and things! Of course he did!"

And he shook his head amazedly. For that meant trust on Darcy's part; trust and liking. It made him feel a little humble, as he rode on down toward the long roofed porch of Rock's behind the six huge cottonwoods. Humble—but proud, too . . .

Even in the bright sunlight of mid-afternoon, there was something about the old store on the riverbank that made a ripple of displeasure twitch Buck's spine. Somehow, it made him think of a dust-gray rattler—a thick, powerful rattler—drowsing in its coil; quiet, but ready to whip its sinister head forward in a deadly stroke.

Then he laughed and tickled the chunky Pigpen black with a rowel. He was a grown man, he reminded himself. Nothing that Darcy had told him the day before but proved that.

He would turn up something here about the Block M and Half-Hat horses, not because he was a swaggering know-it-all like Mike, but rather because he was not; because a tough gang like this which headquartered at Rock's would hardly suspect a youngster; and—Darcy had made this plain—because they liked to have a smooth-faced young fellow around for special errands.

The trail he followed was not the main road. It was a shorter way from the Block M across the thirty-odd miles between the cut line fence and the ford. It angled down to the Bono's bank, then followed the river up to the store.

A gash of red in the willows caught Buck's eye. He watched until sure it was a woman's dress, not a man's shirt. Then he rode carelessly toward the movement of the crimson spot. He reined in beside a crude well on the riverbank and the girl straightened at her washtub. Absently, she put up a soapy hand to push dark hair from a low, broad forehead. Her eyes were dark, full-lidded, set well apart. Her mouth was generously wide, but beautifully shaped. For the rest of her, she wore patched and faded skirt below the red calico dressing sacque which had caught his eye. And her small feet were bare. Slim, yet never angular, she looked to be sixteen or seventeen. And she stared at him blankly.

Buck nodded to her, but she did not return the greeting. He checked his first impulse to ride past and sat fumbling for tobacco and papers. In her half-wild way, this girl was as pretty as anyone he had ever seen—as pretty, even, as Tess Howard. But, of course, she was not Tess's kind; she was one of the riffraff congregation naturally around Rock's Ford; some tough case's girl; ignorant, tough as her man—

"Good-bye!" she said abruptly. "Roll your hoop, cowboy! No free shows around here."

She had a soft, oddly-husky voice. It was not like any woman's voice Buck had ever heard, and it fascinated him. He

swung down and crossed to the well. The bucket dangling from the sweep was full. He lifted it and drank, watching her over the rim of it. She stooped and put her hands into the suds again. But she watched him while she pretended not to.

"Any law against telling me what your name is?" he demanded, thinking of no diplomatic way to put the question.

"No," she answered calmly, and went on washing.

"Then why don't you tell me?"

"It's no affair of yours. But you're going to be somebody else's affair, if you hang around here. Blonde Tony will put her head out of that door up yonder and—"

She wrung out a dress and dropped it in another tub and began to whistle. Buck grinned and leaned upon the wooden box that was the well-curb and listened to the liquid trilling that seemed to have some thread of melody, but none familiar to him.

"And then Blonde Tony will come down here and he'll shoot me with his big pistol and they'll bury me out on the lone prairee; and likely you'll come along and set a washtub on my lonely grave; and folks'll tell how I was a bright young cowboy until suds got the better of me. This Blonde Tony, now, he—"

"Blonde Tony's a she. Probably the prettiest and the meanest woman in the state. I work for her. She won't have a man looking at me. Even if she doesn't want him, he'd better act as if he wanted her around Rock's Ford!"

There was venom in the husky voice. Buck looked mechanically at the gray old building fifty yards away. Then he grinned and relighted his cigarette.

"Reckon I'll have to call you Jaybird—account of the whistling," he said, meditatively. She flushed angrily:

"My name is Dell, if you have to know. Dell Ingram. Now, for the last time, I tell you that you'd better go."

"All right, I'll go. But I'll probably be around the Ford a spell. So—I'll see you, Dell."

She said nothing. But when he went back to the horse and mounted, then turned the black and waved, she called to him. There was a faint surge of color under the olive skin of her cheeks, though her face was blank.

"And what's *your* name?"

"Buck Mabry. I'm off the Block M—"

"The Block M? Why— You mean the outfit that came up here a few days ago, about some stolen horses?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Buck shrugged carefully. "You must mean that big blowhard brother of mine. Mostly, it's because of him that I'm off the Block M. Clear off!"

She stood staring, bubbles dripping from soapy hands. Suddenly, she looked nervously at the store, then the bare feet twin-

kled beneath the old skirt's hem. She ran like a wild thing, silently, springily, gracefully. She caught the leg of his overalls and looked up at him.

"Don't go up to the store! Please don't go. You look like a nice boy. You never have mixed with a crowd like that. Anybody could tell it. Don't go up there and start down that road. Turn that horse now and ride the other way. *Please!*"

"If it's all so bad as that, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here because— It's none of your affair! My troubles don't concern anybody else—"

"Troubles?" Buck interrupted her. "Maybe somebody can help with 'em. Anyway, I'll be seeing you!"

She was still standing there, staring after him, when he reached the corner of the store. He waved at her and went on around to the hitchrack beneath the cottonwoods. He swung down and, facing three men on the wide porch, stiffened inwardly. The men themselves could pass as ordinary hands of any neighboring outfit. But it was what they represented that checked Buck for an instant. He reminded himself that he was a spy in enemy-country; and that a spy's fate here at the Ford was pretty apt to be unpleasant!

But he tied the black to the cross bar and would not let himself whistle to show how carefree he was. Instead, remembering Darcy's advice, he looked sullenly at the trio—a squat, dark man with snaky eyes; a hulking, red-haired, piggy-jowled man; a loose-lipped, tow-headed youngster with silly grin—and nodded to them slightly. He crossed the sagging porch with clink of spur rowels and clump of boot heels, and stood in the doorway of the store, blinking against the dusk.

Rock, he knew by sight—a big man, beginning to be bald, with wide, still, pale face. But the storekeeper was talking to a man even taller than himself, who was a stranger; a handsome rider, very neat of silvery Stetson, green flannel shirt and dark gray trousers worn over polished tan boots. And a little down the counter a brown-faced, shabby youngster sat upon a box and sang drunkenly to himself.

Rock's narrow eyes came to Buck and seemed to probe his face. Buck came to the counter and nodded. He still wore a sullen expression. The tall, dandified man glanced carelessly at Buck, then his hazel eyes returned to study of his cigar end. He drew in smoke, blew rings toward the ceiling and said to Rock:

"Well, that's the way I feel about it, Rock. Do as you please, but I play her my way or I don't play—as usual!"

Rock grunted and continued to stare at Buck, who indicated a whisky bottle that stood between the two men. Then he looked at the tall man and at the seemingly drunken youth who sang monotonously.

"Set 'em up for the house," Buck said.

The cowboy got up from his box and lurched down the counter. The tall man stared at him, then nodded:

"Thanks! My name's Awe. The young fellow there goes by Jackman. Mine host is Mr. Rock. I don't rightly know whether he's got a first name, or not. But if you're not a stranger in Bono County, you'll know him by Rock."

"I'm Buck Mabry," Buck said in a sulky voice. "I reckon you know the Block M outfit. I think my brother was up here the other day with Big Bill Howard. They lost some horses and started for Owl Creek hunting 'em."

"Owl Creek?" Sonora Awe said gently. "But that's not on the way to the Ford, here. What makes you think they came this way?"

His bold, handsome face was only interested as he looked at Buck. But knowing what he did, Buck was not in the least deceived. He shrugged indifferently.

"Mike said he was coming down here if he never cut the trail at Owl Creek. And

from what a Half-Hat puncher told me, that turned back from Owl Creek, they hadn't located horses or"—suddenly he looked straight, defiantly at Rock—"thieves. Didn't the party come here, Rock?"

Rock nodded. Sonora Awe turned to the storekeeper. One might have believed all this to be news to him.

"Yeh, they helled up and they looked around," Rock said tonelessly. "Talked a lot and turned back. They send you up to see if you could see anything they missed?"

His narrow eyes were hard and bright, but Buck met them steadily as he lifted his tin cup of whisky. He saw both Rock and Sonora glance at his hand, but it rose without a tremor. He was pleasantly tense, matching wits with these two.

"Glad-to-meet-you!" Jackman interrupted now, splashing whisky from his cup as he waved it. He stared with owlish dark eyes at Buck. "Mighty-glad-to-meet-you."

"Same to you," Buck nodded, and put his cup down half-empty, to turn back to Rock. "You don't know much about the Block M, I take it! Well, sir, it's one of those outfits you have got to be seven foot high on, before you collect wages. Can't even own your own horse. You get your grub and clothes and when your rings tally forty-six, they let you vote. And so—I'm going north. I'm a Hand and, *por Dios!* I'm going to take a looky at the Montana country. I was up there two year back with a Block M trail herd. Cinch I can't do worse'n on the Block M!"

" 'At's right," Jackman agreed solemnly. "No money to pushing li'l' cows around, anyway. Maybe I'll go north with you. Ask me tomorrow. Busy, now."

"Had a row with Big Brother, did you?" Sonora Awe grinned. He waved at the bottle and Rock refilled the three cups. "Quite a boy, that Mike Mabry!"

"So he admits!" Buck exploded angrily. "It's bad enough to have the Old Man raising hell with you. But when your own brother picks up where your Pa leaves off, just because he's a six-footer and five years older— Ah, to hell with the Block M. Next time it sees me I'll have my pockets full, and no man'll be telling me what's what."

"Fine!" Sonora Awe said softly. "The way to talk!"

SMOKING SIXES

Jackman began to tell a long story about a girl down in the Brushy Country from which—he said—he hailed. She had given him the mitten and he was going to be a wanderer. They stood drinking. Buck saw occasional chances to drop a cupful of the stinging home-made whisky into the sawdust before the counter. So he stayed more or less sober while Rock and Sonora talked quietly at the counter's far end.

The three men on the porch came in for drinks after an hour or so. The squat, dark man was Ken Breed. He seemed to be the leader of the trio, though the red-faced man—Vance Cortland was the name he gave—was louder of mouth. The tow-head grinned at Jackman and Buck and drank every time that anyone bought. He was Arnold Tetter and he came from the Panhandle, by his account.

Then as Buck leaned on the counter and tried to figure his course of action here, Jackman whooped enthusiastically and went at a swaying run across the long room. Buck turned and with sight of the tall, fair-haired woman in a back door, he drew in a long, slow breath. She was—she had to be—"Blonde Tony." And he could believe the girl Dell's statement, that here was the prettiest woman in the state. When the tall figure came across the rough floor, looking utterly out of place in a black satin dancehall girl's dress, and stared at

him with china blue eyes, he could believe the other half of Dell's assertion, concerning Tony's disposition. There was viciousness in the set of her full mouth; even more in her eyes.

Jackman reached her and almost mechanically she put her hand flat on his breast and pushed. He sat down, while the others in the room laughed. She came swaying toward the counter. She looked at Rock briefly, then at Sonora Awe. But when she stopped, it was at Buck's elbow, and very calmy she stared at him. Buck took off his hat, as Sonora had already done.

"Pour me a drink, Rock," she said without looking at the storekeeper. "It's about the only thing bearable around this hole—and if you put any more cayenne pepper in the barrel it won't be—"

She looked steadily at Buck.

"So you're the little boy that keeps my washerwoman from working, are you?"

Buck wondered how to meet the attack. So he shrugged.

"I usually stop and look a girl over when I meet her," he said drawlingly. "If you don't want your washlady talked to, don't leave her on the river where folks can see her."

"Bright boy!" she cried, and picked up the cup which Buck had pushed her way. She flung it at Buck, who turned his head and let the whisky drench him.

"You're not much at training women, are you?" Buck inquired of the storekeeper. "Or is she in *your* brand?" he demanded of the smiling Awe.

A wave of color came into Rock's still face. The hand which held the quart bottle tightened. Then he relaxed—and Jackman, getting up, interrupted:

"Come away, Mabry," he called thickly, with much dignity. "Don't monkey around where gals chuck whisky at you. Me and you, we don't have to be pushed by saloon women. Come on!"

Sonora Awe, meeting Buck's stare, slightly shook his head. He moved toward a rough table in a dusky corner of the room. Buck waved Jackman away and trailed the tall gunman to the table. They sat down and at the counter Rock and Blonde Tony, heads close together, seemed to quarrel in low tones.

"That's a sore subject with Rock—Tony is," Awe told Buck. "He's jealous and he thinks I've been looking at her. And that Dell kid, Tony's jealous of her. But never mind, I wanted to talk to you, for you look smart enough to trust. I reckon you've heard a lot about Rock's Ford and some of the people around here—like Ken Breed's bunch there . . ."

"They've got a rough name," Buck admitted. Inwardly, he tensed. It seemed that Sonora was going to take him at face value; admit him—if cautiously—into the secrets of the Ford.

"I've got to be careful!" he told himself. "This is a brainy thief and, if he suspects me, I'm a gone goose!"

"The trouble is," Sonora said critically, staring at his smoke rings, "they're mostly a bunch of bums, from what I've seen of 'em. I don't want any tie-up with 'em. A good little *buscadero* never does any unnecessary killing, Buck. And those *gunies* would knife their grandmothers for two dollars; or get the lawmen trailing 'em by some silly killing there was no need for. I sized you up and I think we can get along—and to hell with Rock and his thickhead hard cases! How do you feel about it? You're not loaded down with cash, from what you said. Are you on for a fat hen I've got setting?"

"I've got twenty-five dollars," Buck said abruptly. "If that's not proof enough—"

"How about collecting some back pay from the Block M, then?" Sonora said softly, leaning across the table. "Twenty head of those gold horses would pay dividends, wouldn't they? And nobody would expect a second lick, so soon."

"A second lick? Oh, you mean after the other day. Did Breed and Cortland and Tetter lift the other bunch?"

"They may have. I don't know. I wasn't there. You see, I'm a sort of outsider at the Ford. They don't try to run any sandies because none of 'em wants to slap leather with me. But they don't tell me what they're up to. This job will be ours —just yours and mine. We can make a clean getaway and I know the buyer who'll misread a Block M brand, if the price is right. Are you on?"

"When do we start?" Buck demanded, as eagerly as he could manage. "We can clean out the whole horse range. Turkey French won't miss 'em for a week."

"What about Mike?" Sonora asked frowningly. "Does he get around pretty often to check up?"

Buck was puzzled. Either the dark man opposite him was a consummate actor, or he did not know the name of the man he had shot in Bono; and that last seemed incredible. But in the handsome, sardonic face, the wide hazel eyes, there was nothing now but a reasonable curiosity.

"Why—why, Mike, he's got a girl—the Howard girl on the Half-Hat, next door," Buck said as carelessly as possible. "He spends a lot of time over there. Turkey's the only hand left on the place. The rest are on the trail with the herd. The horses are mostly in the east pasture. No trouble to slide in and round 'em up. We can handle fifty head and they ought to bring a hundred even from a crooked buyer!"

"Fine!" Sonora nodded. "I'll dream on this and tell you tomorrow how we'll work it."

"I'm ready to start tonight!" Buck assured him.

"Tomorrow's soon enough. Now, keep your head shut, Buck. This is our hen and we won't make a social out of the eating. I'm going to hooraw Rock a little. Throw him off guard, you know. He wants me to go in with Breed and the Ford bunch on a job. I'll make him think I'm going to. And so he won't suspect we're going to do one on our own, and want in on it."

"But," Buck persisted, even though afraid of making the tall man suspicious, "if they got the other bunch of Block M horses, and the Half-Hat horses, too—"

"I doubt if they did," Sonora shrugged, with contemptuous glance at Breed and the others. "Probably that was another gang entirely. These fellows have been bumming drinks for the last month. If they had got those horses, they'd have money now. And they haven't five dollars between 'em."

Buck remained at the table while Sonora went at light, sure step toward the counter. Then Blonde Tony turned, where she had been pushing her cup idly about. She came over to the table and smiled at Buck. He stared at her without expression and she moved to put an arm about his shoulder, bend and kiss his cheek. She sat down, laughing — at his red face, Buck guessed. She put elbows on the table, propped her chin in clasped hands and studied him from under lazy lids.

"Don't be sore, darlin'. I've got hell's own temper and that Dell is more trouble than she's worth. I can't get any work out of the little trollop to pay for her board."

"Why don't you push her out, then?"

"Oh, she's one of Rock's notions. He found her starving on the prairie or something, and brought her home like you'd pick up a stray pup. And he throws a fit when I say to send her over to Bono or something. But forget her! You're going to stick around, ain't you? You're a good-

looking kid . . . The first that's come along since I've been in this hole. Like me, Buck? I could like you a lot . . ."

"Trying to get me killed?" Buck grinned, with jerk of the head at Rock, who talked now to the four men as a group. "Sonora can hold up his end, if Rock don't like his looking at you. But I'm no gunslick. No matter what I feel like, I'll manage to keep the brakes on around the Ford!"

She laughed and caught his hand under the table. But he faced that back door through which she had entered the room. And in the semi-darkness beyond it, he saw Dell Ingram, staring angrily at the two of them. He pulled his hand away.

"Don't mess around!" he told Tony, quickly. "I'm not ready to get killed yet!"

She got up and looked down at him.

"You'll be around. We'll talk things over. Maybe I'll tell you a way to get over being scared."

Dell vanished from the door and Tony went out through it. But to Buck carried a scuffling from the passage, the sound of a sharp slap and a vicious oath. He thought that Tony had caught up with the girl and his mouth tightened. Found on the prairie . . . brought home like a stray puppy. He wondered about that; it did not seem to jibe with what Dell had said of her "troubles." He decided that he would look up Dell and ask her pointblank how she had come here; and why she stayed.

He went back to the counter and stood alone, smoking, pretending lazy indifference. Jackman lurched in from the porch and took up his post on the box, singing softly to himself, staring at the toes of his dusty, runover boots.

My gal's a high-born lady.
She's black, but not too shady,
Colored like a peacock—just as gay,
She ain't colored—she was born that way—

The loose-mouthed towhead, Tetter, came grinning down the counter. Reaching Buck, he leaned and dug his elbow into his back. It was usual cowboy horseplay and Buck, twisting, drew away and let Tetter come forward. The towhead's chin cracked the counter and he straightened, still grinning, but with pale eyes oddly bright. Buck leaned against the counter edge, grinning also. He had one glimpse of Jackman getting off the box. And Jackman's brown face was strangely, suddenly alert. Drunken stupidity was gone from his expression.

But there was no time to speculate concerning this alteration. Tetter said in almost good-humored voice:

"You're a comical son of a dog!"

Then his hand smacked the smooth walnut butt of his pistol. Almost, Buck was so taken by surprise that he stood gaping. The half-silly grin, the general air of unimportance, of this junior member of Ken Breed's gang, made this flashing draw, the smooth efficiency of every movement, amazing. He caught himself, though.

He did not try to match drawing speed with Tetter. Instead, he lunged the yard between them and desperately snatched at Tetter's gunwrist. His fingers closed about the wrist as the Colt cleared the holster. Buck twisted and with the roar of the muffled explosion he thought that he was shot, for flaming pain shocked him. Then Tetter sagged against him. The grin froze upon the pudgy face; lids sagged over pale eyes; when Buck stepped back Tetter crumpled. Neck, waist, knees—he bent like paper.

"What did he want to do that for?" Buck demanded of the stiff group up the counter. "Don't you pull a gun!" he snarled then, at Vance Cortland, and drew his own.

BUSHWHACKED!

"Cut it!" Rock snapped at Cortland. "You got no call to take up Tetter's fight. He brought it on himself. All right, Mabry! Put your cutter away. It was a clean kill. Nobody'll say anything else. Tetter was wrong."

Buck looked dazedly around. Everywhere but in the direction of Tetter. And, meeting Jackman's stupid, open-mouthed stare, he wondered how he could have believed that the cowboy had shown any intelligence an instant before. Now, he was obviously still half-stupefied by his liquor.

He reholstered the .44 and motioned toward the bottle at Rock's hand. He was shaken, but not shaking. He had killed a man, and the idea was not pleasant. He wanted to get out of the room; away from the still figure on the floor. And he found it hard to believe that this had really happened. In a minute, Tetter would get up— He shook his head and caught the full tin cup that Rock sent streaking down to him. He gulped the whisky and drew a gasping breath.

"I've got to hold up!" he told himself. "Got to! There's nothing to shake about. He was going to kill me. And likely he was overdue a killing a long time."

He turned mechanically at the sound of running feet in the passage behind the store. Tony and Dell stood there staring in. The blonde woman looked at Tetter, then at Buck.

"Well, I'll be a bad word!" Tony said, amazedly. "The pup *can* bite!"

But beyond her Dell's face showed strained and white. Then Tony moved and blotted out sight of Dell. Buck looked broodingly at the faces in the store, before he turned and walked outside. His black horse still stood lazily at the hitchrack. Odd! It seemed ages since he had ridden up to these cottonwoods. And it was not dark yet.

He crossed to the horse and loosed him, passed up the reins over the thick neck and mounted. He saw the men in the store door, watching him, as he rode around the building and went down to the crossing. Where he was going, he hardly thought. But he wanted to be in the open, away from that sinister atmosphere at Rock's.

The black splashed into the muddy Bono, crossed and climbed the northern bank. At a walk, he moved forward and Buck rode with shoulders sagging, thinking moodily. He knew little more about the Block M horses than when he arrived at the store. As much by luck as anything else, he had killed a tough cowboy. And that was the whole tally!

"Might about as well keep on going, the way I told Rock I was," he muttered. "Let the horses go. Let Mike and Pa hunt 'em, or settle with Rock's thieves. I'm no army! I can't buck that gang there at gunplay, and they're not going to tell me anything."

He thought of Dell's dark, pretty face, strained, fearful . . . It was a vivid picture in his mind; and it had odd power to pull at his left arm, so that the black halted. Strange that she should affect him so, when in all his consideration of the future, he had

not thought of Tess Howard. He thought of Tess now, but only to shake his head.

"She's crazy about Mike. She's afraid of him, but still she's in love with him. And—somehow, it seems a long way behind. It—"

He turned, for there were hoofs thudding on the trail coming from the ford. A slim figure on a big yellow horse . . . He turned the black and sat staring, hand on Colt butt. Then he recognized Dell Ingram and frowned bewilderedly. She came up to him at the gallop, pulled in and pushed back dark hair from her eyes in her familiar gesture.

"Thanks be I overtook you in time, Buck!" she panted. "I had to sneak Rock's pet horse out—it took time—they're going to rub you out, Buck. They're pretty sure that you're a spy for the Block M and Half-Hat. So they told Tetter to get you. Now, somebody else—"

"Me!" Vance Cortland said huskily and pushed his horse out of thick brush. He laughed. "Yeh, me! You wasn't quick enough, Dell. And the kid here, he rode right slow. So it was simple enough to head him off."

Buck sat frozen-still in the saddle. The red-haired man held his pistol on the saddle horn, the muzzle trained upon Buck's belly. The hammer was back under Cortland's thumb joint.

"What about Sonora?" Buck demanded.

Then, suddenly he realized that Sonora's talk of being an outsider was merely part of the gunman's act. And Cortland's reply proved the truth of that guess; that Sonora had merely talked with him, proposed the stealing of Block M horses, to make sure that he *was* a spy.

"Sonora's awful picky in his old age. He won't even go horse-stealing no more. Says anything littler'n a train or a bank is twenty-two caliber and he's forty-five. When we was hitting for the Block M—"

He checked himself, then laughed.

"No harm spilling it now! There's a nice, sunny spot on the Bono bank waiting for you. You won't be lonesome, either, will he, Dell? Since Rock's run the store, there's been new settlers on the Bono."

His malicious grin was turned on the girl, but the muzzle of the Colt never wavered from Buck. Dell stared at him, mouth sagging a little, eyes wide.

"Then—they *did* murder my uncle!" she gasped. "He isn't coming back—"

Cortland laughed. Buck stared from one to the other, understanding only that the red-haired man got pleasure from this torture of the girl.

"He ain't never been away!" Cortland said—and again he burst into yelling laughter. "So, how could he come back—"

She sent the yellow horse suddenly at him. She stood in the stirrups with quirt lifted. Cortland shifted aim flashingly and with bellow of the pistol the yellow horse came down. And Buck, taking that split-second of advantage, dropped the hands which had been gripping shoulder seams. The rest was merest blur of action. Cortland swung back toward him as he clawed at the butt of his Colt. It seemed to Buck that he was covered before his own gun came up. But when he let the hammer drop Cortland twitched and his horse made a convulsive buck-jump as if spurred. Buck fired again, desperately concentrating on the aim. Cortland went sideways out of the saddle and Buck glared down at him.

"Buck!" the girl called gaspingly. "Help me—I'm pinned down!"

He looked again at Cortland—and there was none of the uneasy feeling, now, which he had known in the store, looking at Tetter.

He wanted only to be sure that Cortland was dead. He swung down and went over to lift the yellow horse a little. Dell came scrambling to her feet. She glanced nervously at Cortland, then quickly away—back at Buck's grim face. She put a hand on his arm.

"Take me away, Buck! Anywhere! They killed Uncle Ed Warren; they'll kill me! And they'll come looking for Cortland—"

"Was your uncle one of the bunch?" Buck demanded.

"No. But he knew Rock. We were coming north and when we got to the store—that was a month ago—Uncle Ed was scared when he found Rock there. He didn't tell me anything except that he'd known Rock on the Border; and that Rock was a dangerous man. Rock wasn't ugly to Uncle Ed. He only said that Uncle Ed caused him trouble in some deal they had been on together. But he didn't seem much put out."

"He wouldn't!" Buck said, dryly. "And your uncle—'went away,' did he? Leaving you?"

"Rock said Uncle Ed was gone on business for him. I was to stay. Tony didn't like it. She thought Rock looked at me. And he—he has been good to me in a rough way. Stopped Tony abusing me. And Tony's crazy about Sonora—and Rock knows it. But Uncle Ed's dead—what Cortland said proves it. He's buried up the bank from the store with the others. I've seen the place. There's nothing to go back for. Take me away!"

"We'd never get away," Buck objected. "No, we've got to go back for a while. Knowing what I know, I believe I can handle what I see to do. Where is this burying ground, Dell? You see, we've had rumors around Bono, about cowmen and others packing money, not getting past Rock's. But there never has been any proof; nobody ever has found any sign."

"They wouldn't. The place is in a little arroyo that comes down to the Bono bank three hundred yards above the store. The brush is thick. I found it by accident. Seven or eight graves are there. Some are—pretty fresh."

"We'll go back," Buck decided. "I'll tell Rock that Cortland jumped me. You'll sneak in and when Rock misses his yellow horse, he'll think Cortland took it. I'll say as much—and say I shot it. Cortland's horse I'll run off. I'll hide his saddle in the bushes. Come on, Dell. It's just a little time. You—you like me, a little bit?"

"Of course," she told him—as simply as a boy might have said it. "I think you're grand."

He looked at her steadily, then shrugged. She mounted Cortland's bay and Buck swung up. They rode back fast until they made the Bono. When Buck had stripped the bay and it trotted off, he hid the telltale saddle and bridle and turned to the girl.

"Can you get back all right? We don't want them sighting us together. For my tale won't have you in it."

She nodded. She seemed relieved of fear, now. There was color in the olive face and her eyes were steady. Buck bent suddenly and kissed her, then rode out of the brush to the crossing and splashed across.

Rock, with Sonora and Ken Breed and two rough-looking strangers, loafed at the counter. All stared fixedly at Buck, but none showed much expression.

"Decide to come back?" Sonora inquired smilingly. "I—wondered if I'd misjudged you."

"I was of two minds," Buck admitted. He was pleasantly surprised to hear the steadiness of his voice; and to realize that he faced these dangerous men without uneasiness. "I thought I might as well go on north. Then—" he looked grimly at Ken Breed "—one of your side-kickers jumped me."

"What?" the squat man grunted. "Cortland?"

"Cortland! But it happened that he made a good deal of noise, so I was ready for him."

"You—you downed Cortland?" Breed cried incredulously.

"What's so funny about that? Some-

body was going to rub him out, sooner or later. I heard him in the brush. So I pulled my gun and had it ready. He rode out and said he was going to collect me. So I beat him to the shot. Only thing I hate, I killed that yellow horse of his, too, accidental."

"Yellow horse?" Rock put in. "Cortland had no yellow horse. *I* had the only yellow horse around here."

"Then he borrowed your horse," Buck shrugged. "For he had a buckskin. I rode back to tell you-all how it was."

He waited. Sonora's easy smile persisted. Rock stared frowningly. Ken Breed stood with hands clenching, unclenching. The two newcomers only leaned on the counter and looked from face to face. Suddenly, Buck wondered where Jackman might be—drunk somewhere in a corner, doubtless. And after all, Jackman was certainly an outsider here. If he were of no help, he would hardly be an enemy, either.

"Well?" he said at last. "Any remarks?"

"It's a funny tale," Ken Breed exploded. "Cortland was tough people. And *you* turn up with a tale about out-smarting him and beating him to the shot. Damn' funny!"

"Suit yourself!" Buck told him indifferently. But he saw that the dark man was working himself up to a fury. "It's supposed to be a free country."

He turned his back on Breed—and whirled again instantly to face him. Breed was drawing. Buck drew—and fired first.

SONORA'S SHOWDOWN

Breed dropped the gun he had got out. And his hand came out of his shirt. His short, dark face was twisted and as he clung to the counter he made panting noises. Buck walked in on him. There was running in his mind something he had once heard Captain Laney of the Rangers saying, about never taking it for granted that a wounded man cannot shoot.

He found himself icy cool. He could watch Ken Breed and at the same time catch the amazement on Rock's face—quickly as it disappeared. And no move of Sonora Awe or the two newcomers escaped him. Breed spoke thickly:

"Don't—kill me—*twice!*"

Buck put out his left hand and jerked the tail of the little man's shirt from his trousers. A short gun was in the waistband under it. He stepped back—a pistol in each hand now—and raked the dropped gun away with his toe. From the door behind him—the front door—a man whooped enthusiastically. Jackman . . .

"Well!" the cowboy said blurrily, coming on into the room. "Looks like you had ought to go in the business, Buck. Or do you just take on two a day? So it's Mister Breed! And only yesterday he was expatiating how-come he's faster'n most folks. Well, well!"

"Take him out back!" Rock said sullenly to the two men staring. "Tell Tony to see what she can do for him."

Buck leaned on the counter while the men supported Breed through the back door. Jackman stood beside him, drunken grin upon his bronzed face. Rock's eyes slid to Sonora Awe and the tall gunman nodded very slightly.

"Looks that way," he said cryptically. "It does."

Buck stared at the two of them. Rock came from behind the counter and indicated the door through which Breed had gone with a jerk of the head.

"Let's go see how bad he really is," he suggested.

Jackman spilled silver on the counter and grinned at the storekeeper.

"All right if we help ourselves to drinks?" he asked.

"Why—" Rock looked at the reeling cowboy, then at Buck "—I reckon whatever you men want is on the house, this time."

Jackman poured the drinks. The fall of

Rock's and Sonora's feet died away. Jackman lifted his cup—and abruptly drunkenness was gone. He had the same hard, bright intelligence of expression which Buck had seen on his face once before.

"What are you here for?" Buck demanded grimly.

"Oh! So you spotted me. Well, that saves time! Ever hear of the Eldreds—the 77 outfit? I'm it. My brother and I inherited three years back. It's about him that I'm here—he came south with three thousand and never got farther than this store. The money's nothing. But, by God! I'll pay off for Rufe if it's the last dog *I* ever hang! You had me fooled. I heard you telling Awe you'd raid your own outfit.

Jackman—or Eldred—vanished from the store with no more sound than a shadow might have made. Buck leaned with moody face upon the counter as the four men returned from the back rooms that were Rock's living quarters. He looked up sidelong at them. Sonora and Rock wore unreadable expressions, but there was a certain stiffness about the other pair which warned Buck that something had been discussed out there; something that concerned him. But the two men walked straight out of the store. Sonora came down to pour himself a drink. Rock lit a cigar and picked up a tattered newspaper.

Sonora stared at his whisky. He was smiling as at some private and pleasant

"I Don't Know How I Failed To Kill Him!"

And so I added you to the list here. Then when you downed Tetter I sort of wondered. Looked like Sonora and Rock had sicked him onto you. I was in that back hall when you and Sonora talked; I heard him lying about being an outsider here. Nothing of the kind! He's the Main Auger. Rock's afraid of him."

"That was when I first thought about you," Buck said. "I saw your face and you didn't look drunk—all of a sudden!"

"Reckon! Ne' mind that now. I trailed you when you rode north. I saw you down Cortland. Then I talked to the girl a while ago. She's suspicious of me. I am hunting proof that Rufe was murdered here. I thought she'd know something. But she won't talk to me much."

"I reckon I can give you proof! Three hundred yards up the river is an arroyo where they've been planting the men they killed and robbed here. Likely, your brother is up there with the girl's uncle and some others. And you can count on me to back your play. Careful! Here they come!"

thought. He drank half the cupful and got a cigar from a leather case he carried. He cut off the end of it very carefully, still with that faint smile curving thin lips. The sun was down and the interior of the long room dusky. When his cigar was lighted, very deliberately Sonora turned to Buck.

"You had us fooled, one way," he drawled. "You're a good deal faster than Mike—"

For an instant Buck stared, wondering what to say. Then under the sardonic hazel eyes he stiffened. For he realized that this was showdown between them. Sonora was taking off his mask. And Buck thought he understood the meaning of that remark Sonora had made to Rock, when Breed was shot. He had meant that it was *his* job to handle the troublesome boy at whom they had made three tries. Yes, this was showdown!

There was a lift to it. It was like a drink. Here was as deadly a gunslinger as the Bono country had seen in many a day, forced to deal with the "Block M kid" on terms of equality. Sonora had finished Mike

easily. For that matter, any of the others —Tetter, Cortland, Breed—might have done for Mike here in this neighborhood. But to handle him, the despised kid-brother, no less than Rock put forward his best man!

"*Por Dios,* if that's not admitting I'm a better man than Mike, *I* don't know what is," he thought. Then to Sonora:

"Mike is one of those that put their trust in beef. He never saw the day he could slap leather with me. You see, I have known all my life that I wasn't going to be six foot high, like Mike; with a fine, big bellow like Barnes's Bull. So I played around with Colonel Colt's equalizer a lot. The poker chip draw; pulling from hide-outs—all kinds of stunts. And I'm built a little bit funny, maybe. I get shaky *after* the trouble—not before or during."

He reached across Sonora's front to the quart bottle. Nor did it escape him that Rock was watching over the top of the newspaper. He gestured with the bottle:

"In fact—if I do say it that shouldn't, likely it was lucky for you, Sonora, that you bumped into Mike at the Crystal the other night, instead of Mike's kid-brother!"

Sonora laughed. His hand was thumb-hooked just over the white butt of his gun.

"I don't know how I failed to kill Mike," he said—as if it were a matter of slight importance. "As big a target as that—and still I just put two holes in him! Well, no matter. I can always finish it another time. That will leave the Block M to distant relations when the old man cashes in, won't it?"

"Oh, no!" Buck disagreed, and his metallic laugh matched Sonora's. "In that case, I'd get the whole outfit. For you see, Sonora, since we're putting the cards face up, I don't mind telling you that I haven't got the slightest notion of letting you do what your cheap handy men couldn't do. It would crimp my plans, to have you kill me. So—"

Rock had altered position slightly. His side crowded the counter top. His hand was out of sight beneath the counter. Doubtless, Buck thought, it gripped a pistol. Sonora's grin had widened. His fingers were curled about the butt of his Colt. And he was deadly-fast; two or three stories Buck had heard about him, before the encounter with Mike in the Crystal, made that seem certain.

"So—" Sonora drawled. "So, it comes to an end, the little fairy tale the kid told himself: He was going to show himself a better man than Big Mike; he was going to come up to the Ford, and fool the thieves, and get into the bunch. Then, when he had the horses they ran off the Block M and the Half-Hat, he was going to get out his rope, and build himself a county loop, and drop it over the whole bunch. . . . Ah, me! Shame that the stories don't work out in real life the way they do in books. But —if it's any consolation to you, Buck, you're a damn' sight better man than Mike; and you came within a mile of finding the horses. And that's a lot closer than Mike and Howard would come in years! They—"

"Too much yow-yow!" Rock called impatiently. "That mouth of yours, Sonora—"

"That mouth of mine works when I want it to. Just the *way* I want to," Sonora said tonelessly. "It's *your* mouth you want to think about, Rock. It'll really get you into a lot of trouble—"

Buck took advantage of the tiny interval of preoccupation. Sonora's eyes had never wavered from his face. But Sonora for a split-second thought of Rock. And it was his only chance, Buck knew. Desperately fast and sure, he kicked the tall man on the shin and swung the quart bottle at Sonora's face.

The bottle crashed across Sonora's nose. But he was drawing—and Rock had come to his feet. Buck saw the blur of motion at the counter-end from an eye-corner. Again he struck at Sonora with the bottle, clawing at the other's gunwrist, jumping

away from the counter, getting Sonora between him and Rock. But he missed the gunhand and Sonora fired. So, apparently, did Rock. But Buck was somehow untouched by the slugs. He jumped for the door, running bent over. He heard a bullet strike the plank wall somewhere ahead of him. Then he plunged out and drew his pistol as he ran down the porch.

One of the two in the store fired at him, from a window. He almost felt the heat of that bullet before he reached the corner of the building. Out of the brush that masked the handful of weathered shacks of the settlement he saw men coming. He made an old wagon; zigzagged from it to a cottonwood; turned. Neither Sonora nor Rock was in sight, but from the store came the blast of a cowhorn. From two or three points in the thickening dusk shots came. Slugs struck the cottonwood with soggy sounds. Buck went down to his knees.

"Wish I had my carbine," he told himself, then laughed grimly. "Hell! If I had my Winchester I'd have my horse and I wouldn't be here now—not from choice . . ."

He saw a target—a man crawling toward his shelter, only head and shoulders showing above the brush. He fired steadily at this attacker and was sure he hit him, for the man rolled convulsively into deeper brush, and fired no more from that quarter. Buck looked around. They had him cut off from store and riverbank. Dependent upon how many of Rock's gang were here, they could surround him, work closer and shoot him to pieces. He wondered where Jackman was. Two of them firing in opposite directions could make deadly battle.

He worked away from the thick bole of the cottonwood, intent on getting away from the store, circling toward the thick brush along the Bono, and stealing a horse. He could ride hell bent for the county seat and bring back a posse, to clean up this hole, *if* he could get a horse!

The men worked closer on right and left. Faint yells carried to Buck. He made out words and nodded grimly. Before thick darkness came, they must find him. So he crawled on, shooting no more, but taking advantage of all cover. If he lived until dark, he had a chance. And it began to seem that he could keep away from the hunters until then.

Then a Winchester sounded on the bank toward which he was working. At the flat *whang!* of it Buck stiffened. The bullet cut a branch somewhere beyond and above him. So did the second shot. Buck listened tensely, then began to crawl that way more slowly than before, mouth tight, pistol advanced.

RING OF DEATH

There was a certain amount of grim amusement about the way that unseen rifleman kept Buck informed of his exact position, with regular shots. Buck promised himself that the gentleman would receive a surprise when his target appeared before him—shooting back! He was in a mood to wipe out any of this gang which denned here beside the Bono, vicious animals waiting for unwary travelers over the ford.

He went silently, though with some speed. He thought that, with shooting all around him, the small sounds he could not avoid making would pass unnoticed. So he stopped short, staring incredulously, at sound of his own name coming from the same location as the hidden rifle.

"Buck! Buck!" Dell Ingram called tensely, in a low voice. "This way! Quick!"

He went swiftly forward and found the girl prone in a shallow hollow. He wriggled into the shelter beside her.

"They're all around!" she told him shakily. "Coming up under the shelter of the bank. Going to take you from all sides. They got Gay Eldred—the one who called

himself Jackman—at the burying ground. He was digging up bodies and they shot him—not bad. But they'll kill him. I saw them taking him into a shack beyond the store."

"But how'd you get here?" he demanded —then turned to shoot at a noise before he could hear her reply.

He emptied his pistol and she handed him the carbine, taking the Colt from his hand.

"Go ahead! I'll load this. I grabbed Sonora's carbine and a bunch of cartridges —is this a .44? I've got only .44 cartridges. The carbine's that, you know! I heard Rock tell Tony that Odd Sellers recognized Jackman as Gay Eldred of the 77 outfit. They seemed to know that Gay Eldred was here to hunt for something—they didn't say what. But Rock sent those two men who carried Breed out of the store to get Eldred. They found him at the graves. What will we do, Buck? Is there a chance to get out of this? There are six or seven besides Rock and Sonora —and they *have* to kill you. Rock said so, to Tony. He said it's your neck or his. You'd bring the county down on the gang here."

"He's right about that!" Buck grunted. "We've got a chance—but you oughtn't to be in this. Why did you come down here? Not that I don't appreciate it—but if I get rubbed out— Oh, I can't tell you what I'm thinking. But if I get out of this, maybe I'll be able to. Come on! Let's work along toward the river. If we can just get into the brush down there, it'll be too dark to find us."

They crawled over the edge of the hollow, the girl making no more noise than he did. They covered the twenty yards to the edge of the wide stream bed, and wriggled over it. Downstream there were rustlings in the undergrowth—men moving cautiously their way, Buck thought, and raised the carbine.

But the creeping men went past them. They squatted in a thick clump of bushes. Buck looked at the dim shape beside him. Again, he thought of Tess Howard—and of how completely Tess had gone from mind; pushed out by this ragged, vivid girl who had risked so much to help him. He put his hand on Dell's arm, and felt it tremble.

"When we get out of this," he told her huskily, "I'm going to take you away. Clear away. And I'm going to keep you when I get you! But there's a lot to do, first. Will you be afraid to stay here by yourself while I slide up to the store? Jackman—Gay Eldred, that is—came here on the trail of his brother. Rock's gang had murdered him. No doubt of that! He is too good a man to leave up there for them to knife. So I'm going to do my best to get him loose from that shack!"

"You'll never do it! Don't try, Buck! Let's get away while we can. I—I liked you from the first, boy. I never have liked a man that way, before. I hated all these men around here. But it's different with you. Take me away—now! You'll get killed if you go up there. I'll lose you—"

"No! Nothing like that! They don't expect me; they're too busy hunting around where I was. You stay here, Dell, with the Winchester. I've got to do it—or be a yellow dog!"

He pushed the carbine into her hands and began to move away. She called to him softly, but he went on. He met nobody on his slow, quiet course to the store.

There was light in the long bulding and he was much tempted to shred that room with lead. But Gay Eldred was in one of the sheds, waiting for death. So he went on, for he had come to like the cool, grim young 77 owner. Any man who had nerve enough to come into this den of killers, following on the trail of the brother he must resemble, knowing that he would be murdered ruthlessly if recognized—

"Too good a man to leave in the hole,"

Buck told himself. "I won't leave him."

There was a shed used for a stable, behind the store. And deep in its doorway, now, he saw the red end of a cigarette brighten, dull to a pinpoint again. Someone was standing guard in there. He crept closer and heard muttered voices. Lying flat against the wall, his head all but at the doorway, he could make out the subject of the talk. It was himself! And the guard these men stood was over horses—all the horses then at the Ford.

"Ah, Rock's rattled over nothing," a man said sullenly. "That kid'll never get away. He's in the brush out there, scared stiff! Hell! I been in this country a year. I ate at the Block M two-three times and seen the whole damn family. That kid ain't nothing. Just because he had hell's own luck here, all of you got the shakes about him. Come daylight, the bunch will roll him up like a blanket. He can't get out without leaving a trail. And if he was to swing through the trees, the Choctaw'd follow him. That breed can track a spider across a web. How about that 77 *gunie?* Who's watching him?"

"Odd Sellers. Funny! It was Rufe Eldred kicked Odd off the 77 two years back. Hammered the daylights out of him because Odd had notions to build up a herd of his own—out of 77 mavericks. Then Odd put the hole in Rufe Eldred's neck and now he'll put one in Gay Eldred's, too!"

Buck considered the matter flashingly. Evidently, Gay Eldred was prisoner in one of the other rickety buildings, with the ugly Sellers watching him. He wondered why Rock had not let Sellers kill the 77 owner instantly. But the storekeeper would have some good reason for the delay—Buck was sure of that. And it was of no importance to him, now.

He crawled around the back of this stable. With all the horses guarded here, getting away was no easy thing. But he mapped the course he and Eldred must follow—when he had freed the 77 man. They would come back here, jump the horse guards, take horses for themselves and Dell Ingram—and shoot their way out; fight off pursuit on the road to Bono.

He heard no sound from the next shed. Even when he listened strainedly at the door he wondered if the place were empty. He found a stubby stick and tossed it into the darkness within. And there was a creaking of leather, very familiar to any man who wore a gun. No other sound followed and he crouched beside the door for so long that he almost began to believe that his ears had tricked him; that no gun had been jerked from its holster.

Then a dark shape showed above him in the door; a body standing stiff, studying the lesser dark outside. The temptation to drop the hammer of his Colt was great, but he did not dare risk a shot. So he waited, staring sidelong up at Odd Sellers. It seemed incredible that Sellers would not see him crouching there. But presently the man turned. And Buck lunged at him in a pantherlike movement. The long barrel of his Colt flailed down. Then Buck's arm went around Seller's neck and they staggered into the shed.

Dazed as he must have been by the glancing blow, Sellers struggled desperately for an instant. Buck rammed the Colt into the man's body.

"Stand still!" he snarled. "Drop that gun or I'll blow you in two!"

The pistol thudded to the ground—and Gay Eldred's voice came from the rear of the place—quite calm, even with some amusement in the tone.

"Hi, Cowboy! I was just arguing with Sellers a while ago about you. Sellers was preaching your funeral sermon, but me, I was about to put on a plate for you and yell grubpile!"

Buck made no answer. He was pushing Sellers toward the sound of Gay Eldred's voice. He grunted savagely to the prisoner.

"Hunker down and cut him loose. If you try one monkeyshine, I'll make a monkey out of you—and I won't have to go buy a tail for you to do it, either!"

He kept the Colt in Seller's back until Gay Eldred announced that his hands and feet were free. Sellers straightened while Eldred still sat upon the ground and worked his numbed legs and arms.

"What had we better do with the son, Gay?" Buck asked. "Tie him up and leave him here? They've got all the horses in the stable, with a couple men watching 'em. But if we make a jump at the guards, we can likely lay 'em out."

"Reckon!" Gay Eldred said in an absent tone. "Yeh. Let's tie Sellers up."

He stood, now. While the prisoner waited silently and Buck guarded against a jump for freedom, Eldred passed turns of lariat about Sellers' arms.

"Watch the door, will you?" Eldred grunted. "I'll finish with him, then we'll see about horses."

Buck went outside to lean against the wall. From the store, light still streamed out of windows and door cracks. Someone had lighted a fire in the brush, near the well on the riverbank. Occasional calls down there told of the search continuing. He heard small noises from the shed behind him, and when Gay Eldred joined him, he could hear Sellers gasping and muttering. Buck laughed:

"What'd you do, gag him? Don't seem to like it much."

"Likely not," Eldred said in a grim voice. "Come on, fellow! Let's see about those horses."

GUN ROUNDUP

They were halfway to the stable when men came out of the store. One seemed to detect the skulking figures instantly. Even as he hesitated beside Gay Eldred, Buck wondered if this cat-eyed man were "Choctaw." He lifted his voice in a yell. Behind him Sonora's call sounded:

"Who's that? Answer up, or—"

"This way!" Gay Eldred snapped, and plunged across the hard, bare ground toward the store's front. "Better chance!"

They were chased by lead before they were halfway to the shelter of the store's side. Buck stumbled as a slug struck his foot. He dropped to hands and knees and his pistol fell. Gay Eldred turned back and loosed shots from Sellers' Colt. His hand came down to Buck and his voice—concerned, more than anything else—carried through the ringing in Buck's ears:

"Hurt, Cowboy? Gi' me your hand—"

"No—the damn thing took a heel off!" Buck answered.

Gay Eldred's fire had checked pursuit for an instant. Buck turned, now, and sent three shots into the ragged line—more shadows than shapes in that darkness—before he came erect and ran limpingly on.

The front of the store was deserted. But as they passed it, running feet hammered the floor inside. And yells from the men on the riverbank beyond told them that the way was blocked in that direction. From the store came now the blast of the cow's horn which seemed to be Rock's signal to the settlement. Buck grunted to Gay and they swerved a little. The bed of the old freight wagon offered temporary shelter, and from the store corner lead was coming perilously close, now. They made the old wagon box and dived over the yard-high sides.

"What's the gun?" Buck panted. "If it's a .44, I got a spare box of shells, besides what's in my belt."

"Don't know, but I'll see," Eldred answered evenly—and scratched a match. "Yeh, it's a .44—thanks be!"

Buck was firing over the side, now.

Shots from around the store sent bullets thudding into the hard planking of that ancient wagon. But that lasted only four or five minutes. The cow's horn sounded; then Sonora's high, clear call, ordering the wagon surrounded.

"They can't get away!" he yelled. "We'll smoke 'em out with daylight. Take it easy, lobos!"

"That's a wise boy," Gay Eldred told Buck. "So's Rock. In fact, they're about a foot higher in the way of brains than anybody in the crooked line I've ever run into. A nitwit like Sellers would have downed me the minute he found me up at those graves with a shovel, doing some dirty but necessary undertaking work. But Rock and Sonora, they had an idea I was maybe just first of a crowd. They figured that roasting my feet or something like that'd make me spew information. So they tied me up to talk to later—and so you got a chance to risk your scalp to save mine—for a couple hours!"

"I wondered why they didn't plug you, when they found you on the riverbank," Buck nodded. "Dell—the girl, you know—told me about 'em grabbing you. But I reckon she didn't hear the reason for putting you on ice for a while. Well, one thing's certain, we'll show 'em a blaze of glory like nothing this bank of the Bono ever saw, before they rub out our cute little chalkmarks!"

"It bother you—much?" Gay inquired curiously. "We're funny people, us Eldreds. Kind of like Indians, I reckon—and not much wonder! The 77 is a border outfit and we have been fighting Apaches and Comanches and Mejicanos since the first Eldred spun his loop over the range. If it'd been me that they got here, instead of Rufe, he'd have done just what I did—come looking, ready to go to smoking it. My dad went up against a shotgun—and him with nothing but a six-shooter. He wanted to get that fellow, and he *did* get him. He knew he was gone, but it didn't bother him so long as he got the other man. We're like that. So—if I get rubbed out here, St. Pete'll never know the 77 is coming into camp from any squalling outside the fence!"

"I can think of a lot of things I have got to do," Buck admitted, squinting through the darkness with mechanical alertness. "But I can stand it, I reckon, if I'm sure I have got to. It's the girl that worries me most—not being able to do a thing for her. Funny! Yesterday I would have swore to you that I was tail-over-tin-cup in love with the girl on the Half-Hat; that I'd been wild about her all my life, in spite of her being gone on my brother. Tonight— Well, I never bumped into just this kind of girl, I reckon; pretty in a certain sort of way; with as much nerve as a man . . . And she'll be left here in this riffraff, for the like of Rock or Sonora—"

"It's The Girl That Worries Me Most"

"I liked her too," Gay Eldred admitted. "I never was much to think of marrying, but I told her yesterday I'd take her away with me if she wanted to go. Well, neither one of us is likely to take her anywhere. And it's a shame."

They crouched quietly for a while. Gay made a cigarette and lit it cautiously on the ground where the match flame would not show. Buck moved suddenly to the end of the wagon box. He had caught a slight rustling in the darkness; the sort of noise crawling attackers might make. He lifted the Colt barrel and watched tensely.

"Buck! Oh, Buck!" Dell Ingram whispered.

"What a girl!" Buck thought incredulously. "Come on, Dell. But—but you ought to go back, child! They're going to close in on us with daylight—"

She lifted herself to her knees and her face was all but against his.

"Take the carbine! I can't go back. I slipped through the line when one of the men moved down to get a chew of tobacco from another. I'd never make it back. I'm going to stay with you and Gay Eldred!"

She slipped over the end-gate and sat upon the ground. And Eldred, after a wordless oath at sound of her, smoked silently. She put a hand on Buck's arm.

"There's a chance of standing them off? Of course there is! Somebody out there said this old wagon was as hard as iron. *He* didn't like the idea of charging it!"

Buck made no answer. He found none to make. And Gay moved presently, then called to them in flat voice:

"Day will be soon. Sky's graying over the Bono. Well—"

With the first streaks of light, the attack came. Buck pushed Dell flat upon the ground against the thick planks of the sides. He and Gay fired the carbine and their pistols in alternation, and Dell reloaded them.

In the gray dawn the ragged line of attackers became better targets as they hitched themselves over the ground from one patch of brush to another. Some were hit, as their lead thudded into or glanced off the wagon bed. Buck watched for Sonora and Rock. But they did not show. And then, out of the brush of the riverbed itself, a horseman came. Buck stared at him; his eyes narrowed curiously as another rider popped into the open—and another and another.

"Yaaaiiiaaah!" Buck yelled shrilly, fiercely, if mechanically. For the thick, familiar shape of Darcy the cattle buyer had appeared suddenly, lifting an arm high.

The brush delivered men in the fashion of a magician's trick. They spread in a crescent-shaped line and poured down upon the side of the store. Rock's men gaped, fired quickly, then broke for the store's shelter.

Up to the wagon the men of Bono and the Half-Hat came surging, Darcy in the lead. Buck stood up and Darcy, flinging himself to the ground, grinned flashingly at him.

"Good boy!" he yelled. "All right, men. Down you come! Round up the ranch! Don't let a one of 'em get out of the circle! They're cottonwood berries!"

But grim fire from the store, and the stable behind it, checked the posse momentarily. Buck and Gay Eldred jumped out of the wagon and joined the line. Buck was on the left, where he commanded a view of the stable. And now sight of two mounted figures rocketing out of the long shed stiffened him. For an instant, he stared, then whirled and ran limpingly to the horse deserted by a Half-Hat puncher. He flung himself into the saddle with Winchester across his arm. The big sorrel lunged forward into a lope, on the trail of Sonora Awe and Blonde Tony.

Lead went narrowly past Buck, as he lay along the sorrel's side Indian-fashion, exposed to fire from the store's garrison. But he hardly thought of that. He was too intent on Sonora Awe. Somehow, it seemed to him that if the tall gunman escaped, this blow at the Ford would be only half a blow. So he went by the store hardly thinking of the possibility of being hit. He was two hundred yards behind Sonora.

The Half-Hat raised horses almost as good as the golden halfbloods of the Block

M. This sorrel cut down the lead of Sonora and Tony until less than a hundred yards separated Buck from the gunman's tall black. Sonora turned and his hand hurled flame. It was a good shot; a narrow miss. Buck pulled in short. He threw himself out of the saddle, to kneel and rain slugs at Sonora's horse. The black came to its knees and threw Sonora. But the tall man twisted catlike in air, to land on his feet and run several staggering steps. When he turned, to crouch with pistol up, Buck aimed at his legs and squeezed the trigger. But Sonora was already coming to his haunches, sinking deliberately, when the Winchester's first report sounded. He came to the ground, twisted as if to look at Blonde Tony. Then he lay still.

Buck saw the woman galloping back to Sonora. He shook his head as he mounted. Perhaps she had really loved the big, handsome gunman. She dropped to the ground and bent over Sonora while Buck trotted that way. Then she lifted her hand. A shiny pistol was in it.

"Get back, Pup!" she screamed, and stood straight, began to walk toward Sonora's dead black. "Back! I'll cut you in two!"

She kept the pistol pointing at Buck while she stooped over Sonora's saddle and from a pocket got a buckskin bag. And Buck understood, then, that not love, but money, had brought her back. He drove the sorrel at her and she whirled, running with that jingling bag.

Buck overtook her and slapped the pistol from her hand. She staggered, fell, and he was down, jerking the bag out of her hand, before she could get up.

Standing, with the bag in his hand, he looked grimly at her. She sat up and pushed back her yellow hair. She began to smile at him, a twisted, crooked grimace:

"Don't be — a fool — darlin'!" she panted. "Me and you—can get along! There's plenty in that sack. All Rock took in at the Ford, just about. Sonora—downed him. Me and you—"

He got on the sorrel again and she ran frantically after him as he turned. Both her hands up, her painted mouth a twisted blotch beneath haggard eyes, she screamed at him:

"You wouldn't leave me—broke—on this damn prairie!"

He loosed the strings of the heavy bag and fished a handful of gold pieces from it. They made little shiny streaks in air as he threw them. When he looked back, from fifty yards away, she was on her hands and knees, snatching them up.

He rode slowly back to the store, and passing the shed where Odd Sellers had stood guard over Gay Eldred, sight of a man inside stiffened him. But an oddity about the man revealed itself. He rode over. Odd Sellers stood on tiptoe in the shed. Buck followed the run of the stiff lariat that held Odd to a cross-rafter by the neck.

"So that was what Gay did, when I watched at the door!" he muttered. "Hard people, the Eldreds of the 77 . . ."

Darcy and Big Bill Howard came out of the store. They looked at the buckskin bag. He noted the grimness, the almost absent expression, of the two. Other men who followed had the same preoccupied look.

"I got Sonora Awe," Buck reported. "He was running away with this bag he took from Rock. He shot Rock and hightailed with Tony—Rock's wife. Don't know what's in this. Part's in gold, part's in bills."

"Fine!" Darcy said—as if his mind were

on something else. "Well, reckon it's a clean-up, Buck. I got to thinking about you. Then I talked to Howard, here. We couldn't get Cad Yeo to move, so we gathered up the men we could and come smoking it."

"Just about in time, too," Buck nodded, puzzling their manner. "We figured to hang on their fence."

Gay Eldred and Dell Ingram appeared, walking from the riverbank. The girl stared at Buck, then came faster toward him. Howard stared blankly at her, then back to Buck:

"Well," he said, "you certainly turned the tables on Mike. But making Mike believe that— How about moving over to work for me a while. I can always use—a Hand."

"Don't take him up without thinking," Darcy said quickly. "My business is pretty good. If eighty a month and keep will—well, let you do what you *aim* to do, the job's yours."

"What's all this bidding about?" Gay Eldred demanded. He stared at Buck. "Why—why, I thought he was the white-haired prodigal calf! Don't you figure to go back to the Block M?"

"Not for a good while, anyway. It would just mean a battle with Mike. And with Pa when he gets back from Kansas."

"Then—*amor de dios!* Listen to me, buckaroo! The 77 is a two-man outfit, Buck. Since Rufe was rubbed out, I have had my hands full. You ought to know if me and you can make a team. If you think so—and I know we will—take half the stock and come partnering!"

"I—I wouldn't like a thing better!" Buck told him.

"Then I win the gunslick!" Gay Eldred told the others.

Buck moved over to Dell. She looked up at him expectantly. He took her arm and was moving toward the corner of the store—and something like isolation—when Darcy's hasty yell checked him.

"Not around there! The front cottonwoods are full of berries! Do your talking down on the river, son!"

"Oh!" Buck said, nodding. "Like that! Well—it's not a lot that I need to say," he told the girl. "Just this. If I go to the 77, are you willing to go along with me?"

"Just try to leave me behind!" she cried. "Just try!"

BIG ENOUGH

By CHARLES M. MARTIN

He Was About As Big As A Button, Yet When It Came To Throwing Lead He Was Big Enough

"I taken up for the deceased, gents!"

Men stopped to stare at the little man on the big horse who rode up the one narrow street of Bowie with the setting sun. Hardened gun-dogs of the Border towns glanced from the calm face to the two guns tied on the little stranger's bull-hide chaps. Range clothing scarred from intimate contact with Arizona's cactus and cat-claw, just as the little stranger himself was scarred with the testings that proved the right of each man to live in a country where the survival of the fittest was the predominant rule.

An air of confidence marked his movements as the little stranger swung lightly from the saddle in front of the Silver

Streak saloon and anchored the tall sorrel with trailing reins. Proven gunmen followed him when he pushed through the batwing doors and approached the long bar. Other men inside were gathered in little groups while they stared at a huddle on the sawdust covered floor at the far end. All eyes were turned on the little stranger when he asked the bartender a question in a deep bass voice strangely out of keeping with his diminutive stature. In his high-heeled boots he would not go much over five-feet-two.

"You seen Jim Brown around here lately?"

The eyes of the barkeep narrowed. Then he jerked his black, oily head toward the huddle on the floor in the rear.

"That's Jim layin' back yonder," he answered shortly. "Mebbe you all heard th' shots; Jim shot second!"

The little man straightened with a jerk; eyes narrowed as they swept to the rear. Jim Brown was lying face-down in the sawdust; forty-five gripped in right hand shoved out ahead of his body. The steady gray eyes of the little stranger swung up slowly to the faces of two men standing at the bar closest to the body; held there for a moment that filled the crowded saloon with a thick silence. That strange bass voice drawled a low question at the two men who shifted around to face him squarely.

"You an' Jim had gun-talk?"

The tall gun-hawk pushed his shorter companion back with a sweep of his long arm. He was crouching forward with a contemptuous sneer on his long face, both hands hovering just above the grips of the twin guns on his legs. Men moved hastily out of the line of fire as Long Joe Blake answered with a leering grin.

"Me an' him augered, an' Jim he got took with th' ague. He talked a lot with his mouth, an' I smoked him down. What's it to you, li'l' feller?"

"I heard that Jim Brown was th' town marshal here in Bowie," the stranger answered softly.

"*Was* is kerrect," the tall gunman sneered. "I asked you a question."

"Jim was a friend of mine," the little stranger drawled in his soft bass voice. "I don't know what for th' augerment was about, but I taken up for him where he left off. Jim never shot second to no gun-slick lessen he was tricked. You ready, hombre?"

"Why, you li'l' half-growed prairie dog," the tall man growled angrily. "Do my ears deceive me, or are you draggin' yore coat in th' dust for me to step on?"

"Don't let my size bother you none," the little stranger drawled softly. "I'm big enough to pack a brace of Peacemakers. You heard my wawa."

Little flecks of yellow danced across the topaz eyes of the tall gunman when recognition came to him with the words. A new respect was in the eyes of the other men as hands fell quickly away from long-barreled sixguns, and Long Joe Blake realized that he was on his own unless he could count on help from Shorty Mallard at his side. He hesitated for a moment and the little man smiled faintly. A man whispered loudly.

"Big Enough Riley! Th' fastest gun-passer in th' Panhandle."

"I heard there was a bunch of curly wolves here in Bowie," the little man answered softly. "I heard tell that they howled long an' frequent, an' I come up to help my pard, Jim Brown. I taken up for th' deceased, an' she's yore play, big feller."

Five paces separated the two as they watched each other closely. The little stranger leaned with his back against the bar while Long Joe Blake crouched forward with fingers taloned above the grips of his guns. His hands swept down without warning to slap leather with a speed that challenged the eye. Yellow flame winked from the little stranger's hands when he

swiveled his wrists with a pulling draw that neither started or stopped.

Long Joe coughed as the muzzle of his Colts thudded back in his half-breed holsters; coughed and slumped forward on his face to rattle his big boots on the plank flooring. Shorty Mallard stopped his clutching hands and elevated them shoulder-high as he stared at his partner.

"You takin' up for th' deceased?"

Shorty Mallard shook his shaggy head slowly from side to side. He stepped carefully away from the two bodies before he answered huskily.

"Not today! I got to see a man over in Tombstone about a dog!"

"I'll be right here when you've bought him a license," the little gunman answered softly. "I've come to stay a while. Big Enough Riley is th' handle, gents!"

Two men stepped out from the crowd and approached the little man when he holstered his old Colts with a smooth flip of supple wrists. One of them wore a blacksmith's apron; the other was Jud McChesney, the saddle-maker. McChesney waved his hand at his square-shouldered companion when he spoke to Riley.

"This here is Bill Henry, an' I'm McChesney of th' Saddle Emporium. You said you was stayin' on a spell."

Big Enough Riley nodded while his keen gray eyes probed the faces of the two men. "Lawman or on my own, wolf-tamin' is my specialty," he drawled. "You got a prize collection of th' same here in Bowie."

"That there's th' point," McChesney answered quickly. "Jim Brown was town marshal, an' now Bowie is left without no peace officer to enforce th' law. With trouble hatchin' in several directions all to once."

"You mean yo're needin' a new marshal," the little man guessed quickly. "What's she pay, podner?"

"As th' town committee, we can offer you a hundred an' fifty, with a room throwed in behind th' jail," the saddle-maker answered eagerly. "Th' town pays for yore cartridges, an' you buys yore own grub. You want to pack th' star, Big Enough?"

The little man walked slowly across the room, teetering on his high heels. Stooping beside the two bodies, he turned Jim Brown over and unpinned the star. This he fastened to his own calf-skin vest and stared long into the face of his friend. His deep voice was a whisper that carried across the room.

"I taken up for you, Jim. I'll try to do th' job you set for yourself!"

The bartender shoved a special bottle across the bar when the little man returned to the town committee. Big Enough waved it away as he addressed McChesney.

"You've hired a man," he said simply. "Irrigate, an' then we'll walk down to th' jail where you can point th' sign for me. I don't use it myself, but drink hearty, gents!"

"You see, Big Enough; I'm th' Stage agent here in Bowie, an' we're just about to shut up shop," the old saddle-maker explained.

He eased his thin back against the wall of the jail office; a worried frown on his wrinkled face. The big blacksmith hunkered down on his heels just inside the door, his heavy leather apron covering thick legs to make a table. The blacksmith was drawing little marks on the worn apron with a tally pencil. Dollar marks with numerals after them.

"There's a thousand apiece on all stage robbers," he stated slowly. "But a gent ain't got no show to collect onless he gets said robbers red-hot!"

"You mean they got to be took while in th' act of robbin'," Big Enough answered. "What's th' matter with yore judges in these parts?"

"Might be that they're afraid of stoppin' a slug between th' shoulder blades," the saddle-maker mused. "We ain't been able

to get a conviction th' last year, an' some of these gents was known to be guilty as hell. Yo're pretty handy with yore irons, Big Enough."

"You mean I'm to give them gents a trial when I catches 'em makin' a play, an' if found guilty to preserve th' dignity of th' law with my Peacemakers," the little marshal suggested. "That it, McChesney?"

"Dave White has had a heap of luck that away over at Tombstone," the old saddle-maker answered. "It just don't do a mite of good to arrest them long-riders, an' we've had three stage hold-ups an' two rustlin's in th' last six months."

"Long Joe Blake an' Shorty Mallard was just acquitted of rustlin' stock," the blacksmith growled slowly. "Trouble was Jim Brown saw them drivin' off forty head of his own steers, an' a slick lawyer proved that Jim was prejudiced. Now his widow is about to lose her li'l' spread because she can't noways meet a note for three thousand that comes due before round-up. An' Long Joe picks an' augerment with Jim about that very same rustlin'!"

The eyes of the little gunman glowed with a strange light while he listened. At the mention of the notes due, and the threatened loss of the ranch, his two small hands tightened on the worn cedar handles of the heavy forty-fives thonged low on his legs. His deep bass voice held a strange timber when he spoke in a low tone.

"Jim Brown an' me was saddle-pards for years. Figgered some day that me an' him would have a li'l' spread of our own. Might be that some of these here road agents could be made to pay that there note for th' widow Brown!"

The old saddle-maker leaned closer. "We're shippin' five thousand gold out on th' mornin' stage," he whispered hoarsely. "Chances are them robbers already know about it."

"I'll look around a bit before I turn in," Big Enough muttered suggestively. "Don't you worry none about that gold shipment. I'll take care of it."

The two men rose to their feet. "Now I knows why them Texicans called you Big Enough," the blacksmith chuckled. "Yo're big enough to handle two representatives of ole Jedge Colt, an' you let them do all th' talkin'."

"Yeah," the little marshal agreed. "An' we're likely to hold court in th' mornin' about sunrise. I'll try to earn my pay, gents!"

The little man on the big horse was thinking about Jim Brown's widow as he loped toward the Dos Cabezas mountains south of Bowie. He had seen the widow of his dead saddle pard only once, but Big Enough Riley was determined that the men responsible for her husband's death should pay off the notes on the little ranch —before or after they paid their debts to Judge Colt.

He skirted the rough road used by the stage coach that ran between Bowie and Cochise, and his eyes were whimsical when he stared at the long rows of upright stones that made the Devil's Playground look like a cemetery for those who died with their boots on. Tombstone had her man for breakfast every morning, and Cochise averaged high in the appointment of new peace officers who died enforcing law and order with their old single-action Colts. Up to date Bowie had been fortunate, and the score was about four to one, with dead outlaws on the wrong end of the tally Big Enough Riley had determined to improve that score in favor of the law.

The little man stopped at the top of a long hill and carefully considered the landscape. The stage driver would have to breathe his teams after the long climb, and Big Enough rode back off the trail and ground-hitched his horse with trailing reins as he slid behind a circle of boulders to wait. He could see the lumbering stage on the desert road far below. It would be

nearly a half-hour before the horses would pass his hiding place.

The little marshal crouched lower behind his hiding place when the bobbing Stetson of three riders showed in the brush on the other side of the road. He could see the blue bandannas that covered the faces of the riders, and Big Enough smiled grimly while he loosed the long-barreled Colts in his moulded holsters. The bobbing hats disappeared, and all was again quiet until the creak of wheels announced the coming of the stage. The bearded driver was swearing at his teams; a shotgun guard on the high seat by his side. The laboring horses stopped to blow on the summit when the driver's boot jammed on the heavy brake. A hoarse voice cut the stillness from the other side of the road.

"Hands up, gents! Yo're covered!"

The shotgun guard made the mistake of reaching for his sawed-off as the three bandits stepped into the road. The shortest of the trio shot from the hip, and the guard rolled from the high seat with a bullet through his heart. The three bandits covered the driver and the two passengers; miners from the Barren Flats. The short bandit spoke again.

"Unload, gents, an' elevate yore dew claws. You, driver; kick that box of metal down here pronto!"

The driver swore under his breath as the two miners came out of the coach with their hands raised high. A deep bass voice spoke softly from the rear.

"Yo're covered; th' law speakin', gents!"

The short bandit whirled to face the little man on the big horse. His right-hand gun swung around in a swift arc that never completed it's curve. Lightning winked out from the left hand of Big Enough. The tall bandit in the lead threw a shot even as his partner was falling. The right-hand gun spoke flatly when the little marshal shot from the hip. After which both his guns roared in unison when the third bandit got into action.

The driver sat with his heavy boot on the iron box of bullion. It had needed only a gentle push to send it to the dirt when the little stranger had spoken in his deep bass voice. Now the three bandits were lying in the heavy dust, and the little man on the big horse had holstered his smoking guns. Big Enough slid from the saddle and turned the short bandit over. His lips smiled when he tore the bandanna from the bearded face.

"It's Shorty Mallard," he explained to the driver. "An' just yesterday he told me that he had to go over Tombstone way to see a gent about a dog!"

"Can we get back in th' stage?" one of the miners asked.

"Shore you can," Big Enough agreed heartily. "We got to take these road agents into town, because they was on their way to pay off a note on th' widow Brown's ranch. Can we put 'em on top of th' coach, driver?"

"Th' coach is yores this trip, Big Enough," the driver whooped enthusiastically. "You done saved th' company five or six thousand in gold. An' there's a thousand apiece reward on them hombres. I'll give you a hand!"

A crowd gathered at the stage depot when the heavy coach groaned to a stop. Jud McChesney and Bill Henry were waiting on the low porch when Big Enough swung down from his horse. He motioned to the driver who pushed the bodies of the dead bandits over the edge of the high roof with his boot. The driver shouted to the saddle-maker who stared at the bodies on the ground.

"Hey, Jud, you owe Big Enough three thousand cart wheels for gettin' them there road agents red-handed. He shot it out with them an' beat 'em single handed!"

"Them three gents come in to pay off that note on th' Widow Brown's spread,"

Big Enough said to McChesney. "You pay that reward money over to th' bank for her, Jud. They argued with ole Judge Colt, an' they was all three wrong."

The big blacksmith spoke up. "I'll have a couple swampers pack them fellers up to Boot Hill an' dig a big hole. We're shore obliged to you, Big Enough."

"You got Shorty Mallard," McChesney said slowly. "You remember he said he was goin' over to Tombstone way to see a man about a dog?"

"I heard him," Big Enough answered. "He must of changed his mind, or like as not th' dog up an' died on him."

"You an' me better step down to th' bank, Big Enough," the blacksmith suggested. "That note on th' Widow Brown's place falls due today!"

The little man nodded his head and fell in beside the blacksmith. Bill Henry waited until they were away from the crowd, and he grinned when he drew the marshal to one side and began to talk in a low, earnest voice.

"Swivel Tally holds that paper on th' J bar B," he explained. "Tally runs th' biggest spread in these parts, an' he's been wantin' Jim Brown's place for more than a year. He's a big jigger what sports a swivel holster on his right leg, an' you want to watch him close!"

"Jim wrote me about this Tally hombre," the little man answered slowly. "His T bar T outfit joins th' J bar B on th' north, an' he wants that water hole on th' Brown's place."

"He'll get it, too, if he can," Bill Henry answered, and his voice was doubtful.

"He can't touch it after we pay off th' note," the little man pointed out carelessly. "You give th' cashier an order on th' express company, an' I'll take th' note out to Jim's widow."

"That there's th' point," the blacksmith explained. "Th' note falls due at nine o'clock, an' like as not Tally is out there on th' J bar B right now. An' he's fast with a cutter th' way he uses it, Big Enough!"

"C'mon," the little man answered curtly. "It's nine now, an' after I get that paper I'll be ridin'. There's a connection somewheres between them three bandits an' this Swivel Tally."

"But you can't prove it now," the blacksmith pointed out as they hurried to the bank. "All three of them are dead, an' Tally won't talk about himself. Here's th' bank!"

Big Enough Riley sent the tall sorrel racing across the flats toward a clump of green between two low hills. His heavy silver watch showed nearly ten o'clock when he swung down in front of Jim Brown's adobe house and tied his sorrel beside a big gray near the front porch. A man was talking in the front room, and Big Enough paused to listen.

"I'm taking th' J bar B over today, Missus Brown," a heavy voice was rumbling. "I knew you didn't have th' money to pay on that note I bought up, an' I'm runnin' my stock in to that waterhole soon as I git back to th' T bar T."

"But Jim was selling enough cattle to pay you," a woman's voice answered sobbingly. "Now Jim is gone, an' they are bringing him out here this morning. We are going to bury him under those trees yonder by th' spring."

"Business is business, ma'am," the man answered. "Seein' as I owns th' J bar B, of course I don't want no corp buried on

"They Argued With Judge Colt, An' They Was Wrong"

th' place. Sorry about ole Jim, but you better bury him in town now that you won't be livin' here no more."

"The county might do something," the woman argued desperately. "Jim was killed doing his duty."

"Th' note called for three thousand," the rancher argued stubbornly. "An' th' money was to be paid to th' bank at nine this mornin'. Seein' as Jim is dead an' yo're here, they hain't no use in augerin'. You better start packin' yore clothes, ma'am."

Big Enough turned the knob slowly and stepped into the room. A buxom woman of thirty-five turned a tear-stained face and caught at her throat with her left hand. A tall, heavy-shouldered man got up from the only rocker in the room; scowled at Big Enough who was watching him through narrowed eyes.

"Mister Riley!" the woman almost shouted. "I'm so glad you came. You heard about—pore Jim?"

Big Enough nodded as he patted the widow's hands and kept his gray eyes fastened on the cattleman. The woman recovered herself and made a hasty introduction.

"Mister Riley; this is Mister Tally of th' T bar T. He was just talking over some business with me."

"Down Taixas way a gent takes his hat off in th' house, special when he's talkin' to lady," the little man said slowly. "Mebbe you ain't a gent, Tally!"

Swivel Tally scowled and swept the tall Stetson from his head. Big Enough dropped his own worn beaver to the floor and glanced around the room.

"Right nice li'l' spread you got here, ma'am," he said softly. "Jim told me he refused twenty thousand for it two years ago; I'd say it was worth more than that by the looks of it."

Mary Brown sighed. "I've lost th' J bar B, Mister Riley," she whispered. "We had a note, and it came due today. An' now Jim is dead, an' I wanted to put him away here where he has worked so hard. He wanted it that away."

"If Jim wanted it that away, then Jim gets it," the little man growled in his deep voice. "Me an' Jim was pards, ma'am!"

"Yo're a stranger in these parts, Mister Riley," Tally interrupted, and his voice was raspy with anger. "I own th' J bar B now in case you didn't know it!"

Big Enough Riley turned to stare at the big man. "How come you do?" he asked roughly. "Jim Brown wrote me that all he had against th' layout was a measly li'l' note of three thousand dollars!"

"An' he didn't pay it off," Tally answered. "That's some more that ain't none of yore business!"

"Mebbe we better auger this out," the little man suggested more quietly. "Jim Brown worked for ten year to build up this spread, an' they ain't a white man in th' country that would do his widow out of her belongin's. We can raise that three thousand an' pay off yore note, Tally!"

The big rancher smiled and twisted his black mustache.

"Accordin' to law, that note was due at nine this mornin'," he sneered coldly. "You come too late, little feller!"

Big Enough Riley stared coldly with hands hooked in his gunbelt. A flush of anger colored his tanned face, and his deep voice was brittle when he growled in his throat.

"Don't you let my size fool you none, Swivel Tally. I taken up for Jim Brown, an' right now I'm packin' th' star he was wearin' when he lost that augerment back there in town!"

Tally shrugged with a smile. "You takin' up for him, an' you killed Long Joe Blake. Then you pins on his star, but th' note was due at th' bank at nine this mornin'."

"Jim could have raised that money

easy," Big Enough answered softly. "There's a thousand dollars reward on ever' hold-up that gets caught in th' act, an' all Jim needed to clear his spread was three of them fellers."

"An' now pore Jim is dead," Tally sighed mockingly.

"Yeah," the little man continued coldly, "but you forgot that I taken up for him. Did you bring that note out here when you demanded payment or possession from Missus Brown?"

Swivel Tally scowled with anger and shrugged his contempt. "Both of which ain't none of yore business," he answered coldly. "I'm actin' within th' law!"

"Yo're talkin' to th' law," Riley snapped savagely. "You got to have th' papers on you when you demand payment, an' I asked did you have them?"

"Looks like you didn't hear much about Swivel Tally," the big man answered softly. "Yo're talkin' out of turn, li'l' feller!"

"Looks like you never heard of me," the little man retorted in the same tone, "I'm big enough to back up any play I make."

Tally stared for a moment and then straightened up with a short laugh. "I know you now," he chuckled. "Yo're Big Enough Riley from th' Panhandle. But this is one time when you ain't big enough to buck Swivel Tally, 'cause it's ten o'clock an' th' note ain't been paid!"

The little man stared at Tally while his left hand reached slowly to his inner vest pocket. He withdrew a paper and handed it to Mary Brown. Swivel Tally dropped his eyes and waited for the woman to speak.

She was amazed.

"Why, it's th' note," she said slowly. "And it's marked 'Paid in full' across the face, with the bank cashier's name signed underneath!"

Swivel Tally jerked forward and stared at the signature. "You can't pull no play like this here," he shouted angrily. "Th' time was up at nine o'clock and it's after ten o'clock now."

"That's when I paid it," Riley answered dryly. "Bill Henry was with me, an' we paid off with a draft on th' express company. Th' cashier said it was as good as gold, an' yore money is waitin' for you down at th' bank."

"Express company? They didn't owe Jim three thousand dollars," Mary Brown whispered.

The little man nodded his head. "They did," he contradicted. "Three fellers tried to rob th' stage this mornin' about daybreak, an' there was a thousand reward on each of them. Right now them fellers is planted on Boot Hill, an' Jud McChesney made out th' check to me because I was actin' for Jim Brown. We paid th' note at nine o'clock accordin' to law, an' the boys is bringin' Jim home in a li'l' while. He'll rest easier now."

He finished speaking and turned back to stare at Swivel Tally. The big rancher was facing him with the veins standing out on his thick neck, and his beefy face was swollen with anger he could no longer conceal. Long right leg stretched out in front of his body with hand hooked in the belt above his gun, and when he spoke, his voice was like the snarl of a rabied wolf.

"You pulled a sneak, you runty meddler! I didn't like Jim Brown nor none of his pards, an' I'm callin' yore hand!"

"Up to now I've been dealin'," the little marshal answered softly, but his deep voice was steady. "She's yore deal, Swivel, an' I taken up for Jim. So far I been big enough to call yore bets!"

Swivel Tally threw caution aside and slapped down for the gun on his leg. All

he had to do was swivel the swinging scabbard to shoot through the bottom of it. Big Enough Riley moved like a flitting shadow. Two guns tied-down on his thin legs, but only his right hand flashed toward worn leather like the flick of *vinegarone's* tail.

The cedar handle of the heavy gun was drawn toward his clutching fingers like steel to a magnet. His thumb dogged the hammer back to meet the tilting muzzle when the long barrel hissed against the scabbard with red gun-light tipping the end. Acrid black powder smoke snuffed out the blaze when the heavy Colt, bucking in his small hand, was brought down in line by the steel wrist. It was over.

Swivel Tally was pawing at air like a bull throwing dirt. No familiar handle met his trained fingers, and his jaw hung down with fear and surprise when he jerked his eyes to his belt. Only a fragment of leather hung at his hip; holster and gun thudded against the wall where the slug from the little man's single-action had hurled it.

"Swivel holster," Big Enough sneered coldly. "You was gamblin' for a killin', but that ain't th' law way!"

"You cut that holster off with one slug," the big man whispered hoarsely. "Before I could swing it on th' rivet!"

The new marshal jerked his head in agreement. "Lots of times an enemy turns friendly when th' other feller gives him a show for his tally," he said dryly. "You an' Jim Brown's widow is neighbors, an' she's goin' to need some neighborly help till she gets her bearin's."

"You mean you ain't takin' me in?" Tally asked slowly. "For tryin' to run a blazer about them papers an' all?"

Again Big Enough shook his head while a smile curled the corners of his mouth. "We all make mistakes," he answered gruffly. "When a man is big enough to see he's been wrong, right then he commences to get th' start of bein' a good citizen!"

"I'm sorry, Mary Brown," Tally said awkwardly to the woman. "Reckon I better send a couple of th' boys over to give you a hand. I know where about a hundred of Jim's shippers is hidin' out, an' right now I'm sayin' I've been a dang fool. I'll be ridin' now, but holler loud if you need more help."

He mounted his horse and rode away, and the marshal picked up his hat and backed through the door. Mary Brown followed him; held out her hand with tears in her eyes just as a wagon started up the lane. It was a long black wagon, covered over.

"I'm thankin' you for both me an' Jim, Mister Riley," she whispered. "Like Jim used to say, you don't run so much to size, but when trouble starts you've always been —Big Enough!"

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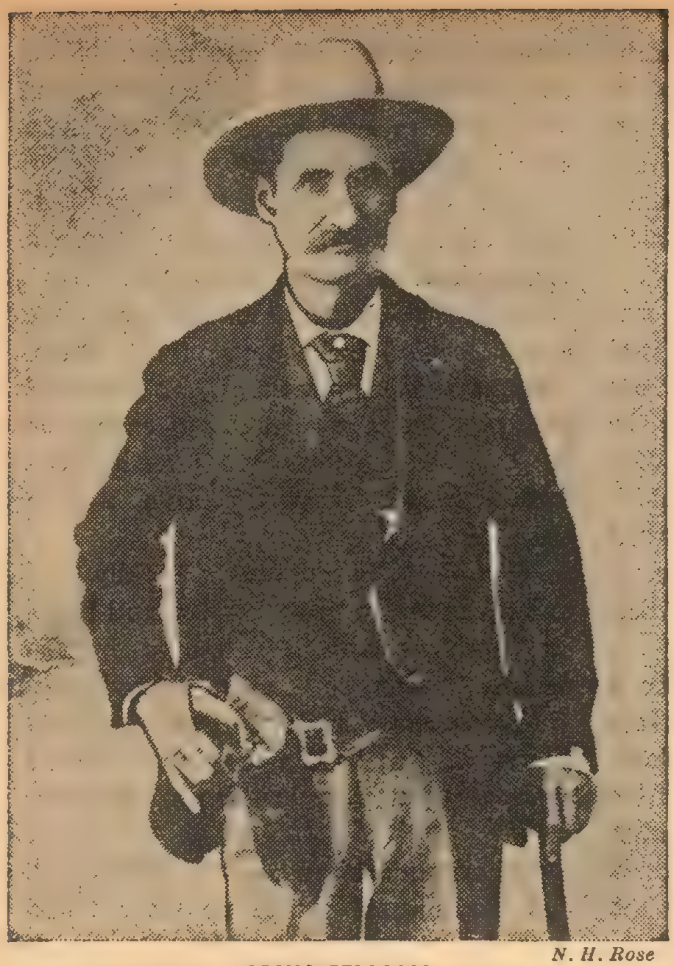
JOHN

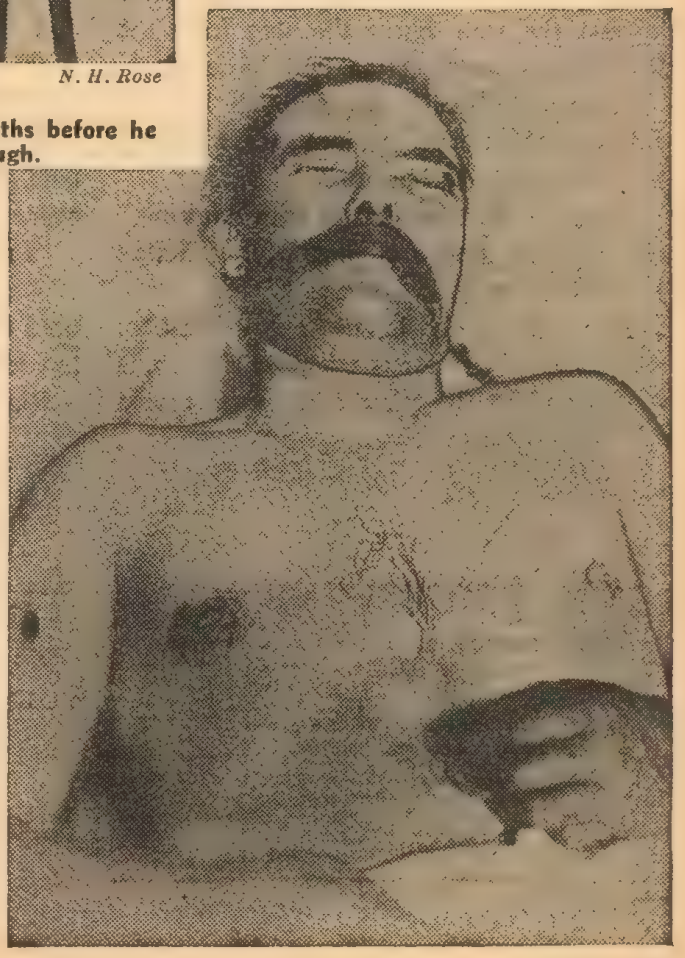
The True Life Story Of One Of The West's Most Noted Gunmen And Law Officer. It Was Selman Who Ended The Career Of The Notorious Killer, Wes Hardin



N. H. Rose

JOHN SELMAN
This picture was taken just a few months before he was shot by George Scarborough.

END OF A KILLER
As John Wesley Hardin looked after Selman killed him in El Paso, Texas, August 19, 1895.



N. H. Rose

Many stories have been written about the life of my father. Most of them are shots pretty wide of the mark. In most of them he has been made to appear a ruthless killer. He did kill men, but he killed in self-defense or in corraling some outlaw wanted by the authorities. Most of the writers have not stopped long enough to investigate the complete record.

As a peace officer in wild old El Paso my father's record speaks for itself.

The Mexican Border was only half a mile away. There were no extradition laws. Railroads were building toward El Paso at top speed and thousands of cattle were crossing the

SELMAN

By JOHN SELMAN, Jr.

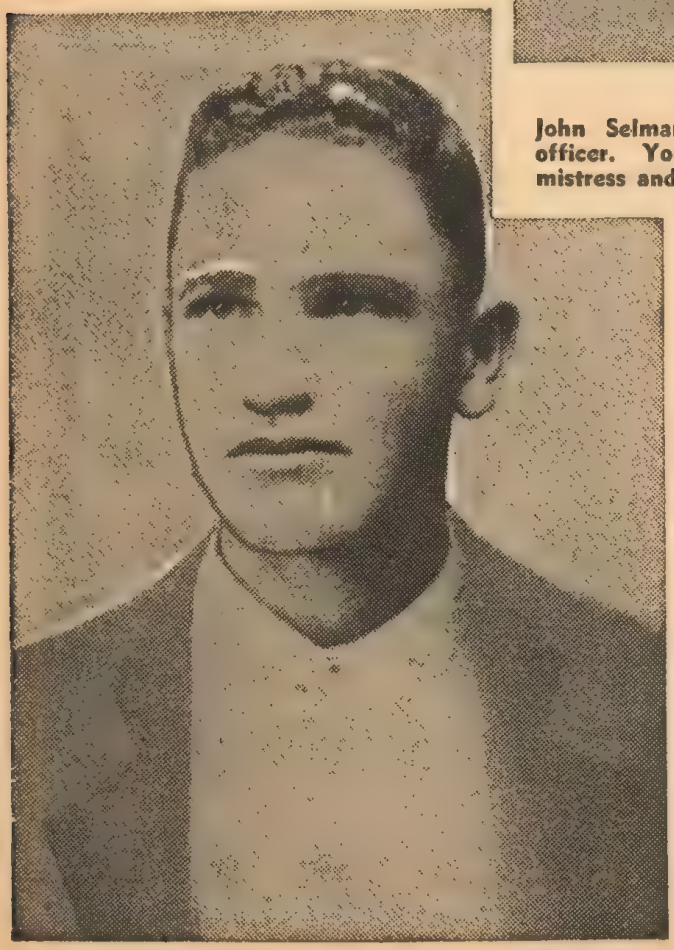
AS TOLD TO FRANKLIN REYNOLDS

N. H. Rose

THE AUTHOR

John Selman, Jr., as he looks today—still a law officer. Young Selman was obliged to arrest Hardin's mistress and thereby brought about Hardin's death at the hands of Selman's father.

JOHN SELMAN, JR.
Taken at the time he became a member of the El Paso police force.



N. H. Rose

Rio Grande daily. Salty hombres from all over the Southwest made El Paso their headquarters. Most of these hard cases were looking for a chance to file another notch on their guns.

John Selman was born in Madison County, Arkansas, on the 16th of November, 1839.

All three of his brothers enlisted in the Army of the Confederate States. Father served in the cavalry — in General Mosby's regiment.

When he returned home after the War he found that two of his brothers had been killed in action and that his father and mother had

both died. With his brother, Tom Selman, father joined a wagon train going to Texas.

Tom settled in Bosque County and father took up cowpunching, working for the big outfits around San Angelo, Paint Rock, Buffalo Gap, Abilene and up around old Fort Griffin.

In Grayson County he met and married my mother, Edna De Graffenried and settled in Stevens County. It was there that my eldest brother, Henry, was born. For a year or so my father punched cows around Throckmorton and then moved over into New Mexico. He settled in Colfax County where my brother, Bud, was born. After a short while he moved over into old Lincoln County, built a cabin and started ranching in a small way.

SELMAN'S SCOUTS

By running a small spread of his own and working for the larger outfits he managed to do pretty well until trouble hit Lincoln County in the form of cattle rustlers. Rustling became so bad, with the stolen cattle disappearing into Arizona, that a meeting of the ranchers was called. A posse to run down, run out, or kill, the rustlers was organized and my father was elected captain. These men were called "The Selman Scouts" and were to be paid for their services by the ranchers they protected. My father named "Gus" Gildea as his lieutenant and went to work. Open war was declared on the rustlers and gun-fights with them became common.

In one spectacular raid on a large ranch the rustlers got away with a thousand head of cattle and started for Arizona. My father with Gildea and six of the Scouts took up the pursuit. The rustlers were overtaken between the White Sands and the Oregon Mountains, where after a pitched battle the rustlers deserted their cattle and made a run for it. My father followed a bunch of four rustlers, was obliged to kill two of them and captured the other two single-handed. The other Scouts captured six. The cattle were delivered to the ranch from which they had been stolen, the cattlemen tried the rustlers and saddled horses were led out from under them.

Along about 1870 he moved back to Texas and settled on the Clear Fork of the Brazos River, where he took up a large parcel of bottom land and decided to try farming for a change.

Soon mother decided she had seen enough of the Brazos Bottoms. Father didn't think much of the place himself. He scouted around for another location. This he found about five miles from Fort Griffin. It was an ideal spot for a cattle ranch, located on a deep creek. Here he homesteaded and later built a rock house. It is known to this day as the "Rock Ranch." Around this ranch some of the bloodiest battles of the cattle war, which took place a few years later, were waged. This war made my father kill a number of men.

The country was overrun with "slicks." (grown unbranded cattle) Some of them were four year olds, without either brand or ear mark. As for mavericks! The woods were full of them and an enterprising young cowman could own a herd in no time at all if he were handy with a rope and branding iron.

Another small rancher lived across the creek from Rock Ranch. His name was John Laren and he was well liked by everyone who knew him. He and father struck up a quick and lasting friendship. They were both just starting out to make a home for themselves. They, therefore, entered into a partnership agreement, pooled their cattle and thereafter branded under the "Four of Clubs" brand.

These two young cattlemen did not believe in trying to raise a herd from their faithful old ox teams but adopted more modern methods. They used fast horses,

long ropes and were not afraid of hard work.

Father was partial to red cattle. Day by day, slicks and mavericks bawled as the "four of clubs" brand was seared on them.

The Comanche Indians had been placed on reservations by the government but this was no assurance that they wouldn't raid ranchers. My father accounted for a great number of these thieving and killing redskins. He held the ingrained belief of all Texans, that the only good Indian was a dead one. With a band of friendly Tonkawas he would often follow the marauding Comanches and wipe them out. How many Indians father killed I would not undertake to say. He never talked about it.

A big party was in progress at the Rock Ranch. Father had killed a couple of steers, and a large party of friends, the Tonkawas, were on hand. About nine o'clock a cowboy spurred his horse up to the house and excitedly told father that a band of Comanches had raided the Mathis place and carried off the boy and girl. The boy was about twelve, the girl about ten.

N. H. Rose

AFTER ROCK RANCH

This picture of John Selman was taken just after he was forced to abandon Rock Ranch by cattle rustlers.

Father got the Tonkawas and started after the raiders. They followed the Comanches clear to the Davis Mountains where they were cornered. So great was the hate of the Tonkawas for the Comanches, and so willing was father to see them get revenge for past wrongs, that the battle was not declared off until the last Comanche had been killed. The children were found unharmed and returned to their home. They were lucky.

The year 1876. It was the night I was born. Our old friends, the Tonkawas were there to welcome me. That night the Comanches raided Rock Ranch and stole a stallion the old man valued at sixteen hundred dollars. He took the Tonkawas and went after their traditional enemies. They got the scalps of fifteen Comanches to bring home.

About this time the rustlers started stealing and running off cattle.

The facts are there was bitter jealousy between the big outfits, and the small owners.

It was always the contention, for the records at least, that the "nester" outfits rustled the big ranches blind.

The small rancher was looked upon with unfeigned suspicion. The big outfits wanted his range

JOHN LAREN KILLED

About ten miles from Rock Ranch there was a camp frequented by fifteen men not known to any of the ranchers. Some nights as many as three or four hundred head of cattle would be run off. One night they hit the Red Herd for more than a hundred head. Father and John Laren with a dozen neighbors followed and overtook them with the cattle near Red River. A running gun battle followed and one rustler was killed, the cattle recovered.

A few days later a bushwhacker fired upon them. Laren's hat was shot from his head. The bushwhacker got away.

Several days later a man rode up to the ranch and asked mother if father was at home.

"No, but he will be home soon," she told him.

About four o'clock father came toward home driving some oxen. A bushwhacker concealed in the oak brush cut down on him with a double barreled shotgun. All the harm he did was to shoot the horn off father's saddle.

He raised his rifle and cut down on that bushwhacker taking him plumb center. That was father's way of dealing with them.

Father drove the oxen home and got an old wagon that was used to haul wood. He hitched up a team and returned to get the dead man. He left the body in the wagon with the legs dangling out over the tail gate.

Next morning two men rode up and hailed the ranch. One of them was a big, fine-looking fellow, evidently the leader of the bunch. "I'm looking," he announced, "for a fellow who left camp yesterday, headed this way. His name is Jake."

Father answered him: "If you're looking for the lowdown polecat who tried to bushwhack me yesterday, there he is in the wagon waiting for the buzzards to come and pick his bones clean."

One of the men rode over to the wagon and took a look. "Yes," he said, "it's Jake all right."

Father's buffalo gun was resting across his arm. The two outlaws decided to call it a day. One of them pulled the dead man across his saddle in front and they rode away.

From this time on there was plenty doing around Rock Ranch. Bushwhacking became an everyday occurrence.

There had been quite an influx of "Carpet Baggers" into the territory, led by a renegade named Gotch.

During the winter of 1878 we were badly in need of supplies and father took a wagon and yoked up four span of oxen. He started for Weatherford to bring back much needed food.

He had been gone about two weeks when one evening about dusk, while John Laren was in the milking pen, a party of horsemen rode up and placed Laren under arrest.

When told they were taking him to Fort Griffin he begged them to allow him to talk with his wife. Permitted to enter the house he managed to whisper to her to warn father. He was then taken to Fort Griffin and locked in a log jail. That night a band of masked men broke in the jail and murdered him.

A messenger met father about twenty miles from the ranch. Father grabbed the messenger's horse, mounted and rode hell-bent for Fort Griffin. He swore to get the killers of his friend.

Father was warned to leave the country. Instead he took to the hills and started a one-man war against his enemies. Only rarely and on very dark nights did he come to the ranch. When one of his enemies got in range his old buffalo needle gun would

speak. He gave that country a number of constructive funerals that winter.

Early in the Spring of 1879, one night, a large party of men rode to the ranch about ten o'clock. The leader said he wanted to talk to my father. When told father was not at home the leader replied that he knew father was at home and that they intended to smoke him out if he wouldn't come out.

They withdrew a short distance from the house, talked it over, and soon started shooting.

My mother, Etta my sister, and I (the baby) slept in an old-fashioned wooden bed in front of one of the windows. The bullets split the head of that bed into kindling wood. Mother took us kids and crawled under the bed. When their fire was not answered from the house they stopped.

A girl staying with us slipped out to the corral, got a horse and rode for J. C. McGrew's Flying Y ranch where she expected to find father. He left her at McGrew's and came home. When he got close to the ranch he dismounted and crawled up to the ranch house without making a sound. From behind a pile of lumber he located the gang.

He kept quiet until daylight when he opened up with his rifle and killed three of them.

Mother was prostrated, became worse and a week later she died.

Rock Ranch was all shot to hell and the red herd was scattered to the four winds. Father made a deal with McGrew, to take us children with him and keep us until he could settle elsewhere.

ON TO EL PASO

Saddling one of his best horses he rode to Fort Griffin to get some ammunition for the long trail. Dismounting at the general store, he started in the door and met his old enemy, the leader of the gang that had killed my mother. They went for their guns, father beat him to the draw and shot him through the heart. Father made for his horse and as he mounted several of the gang ran from a nearby saloon and opened up on him. He killed one of them and shot another.

He headed west, going to Fort Stockton. The first night out he reached the camp of Charlie Siringo about sixty miles from Fort Griffin. He stayed with this stock association detective that night. In Fort Stockton he learned that the Rangers were on his trail. He then lit a shuck out of there for Fort Davis where he fell a victim to the dreaded Mexican black smallpox.

The good citizens of Fort Davis set up a tent about a mile of town and put him in it with a "bar fly" they hired to nurse him. The nurse deserted him and three or four days later a Mexican tailor, Don Guadalupe Zarate, came upon the tent. Buzzards were perched upon the ridge pole. Zarate investigated and found father unconscious and near death. He stayed with father until he recovered.

After recovering he opened a butcher shop in Fort Davis and was doing pretty well when a couple of Rangers dropped in, arrested him, and placed him in the local jail. It was not long before friends arranged for his escape and he was again free.

Don Lupe Zarate had moved back to his native Mexico. Father knew where to locate him and went there. After resting a while he made some money on a contract furnishing a railroad with beef for a construction gang, married Senorita Nicanora, the daughter of his friend and sent for us children to come to San Pablo where he had opened a saloon.

Soon after our arrival in San Pablo Ike Blum and John Breem come down and joined father. For some time father was engaged in the saloon, cattle or mining business in Mexico in association with other Americans. After a severe illness he decided to return to the United States to live. That winter we stayed in Fort Bayard.

When spring came father started out on a prospecting trip through the Mogollon Mountains with two friends.

He returned to Magdalena broke, borrowed twenty-five dollars, got in a poker game and made the biggest winning of his career. His winnings were eight hundred dollars in cash, the saloon and fixtures.

One day on the street he met his old enemy Gotch from Fort Griffin. Gotch declined to fight, then after father had cursed him soundly and turned his back, Gotch undertook to shoot him in the back. Father whirled and shot him down. He sold his saloon and went back to San Pablo. For a while he was agent for the John Deere Company selling farm machinery in Chihuahua. Tiring of Mexico he moved to El Paso.

My best recollection of El Paso in 1885 was of a bustling little town, then called Franklin. There is no question but that El Paso was the wildest town west of the Pecos.

DALLAS STOUDENMIRE

The outstanding thing about El Paso at this period was the homicidal tendencies of the citizens. Only a word was necessary to start them reaching for their forty-fives. To this wild and woolly little frontier town came my father shortly after the passing of the first city marshal, the great and fearless Dallas Stoudenmire, who had the reputation of shooting first and arresting them afterwards.

Stoudenmire had never been friendly with the Manning brothers who operated the old Coliseum Theatre and a saloon where the Paso del Norte Hotel now stands. From New Mexico with him had come his friend, Doc Cummings, who had opened the Globe Restaurant in El Paso. They thought a lot of each other, and one day when Stoudenmire had to be out of town he turned the marshal's office over to Cummings. While serving as marshal *pro tem* Cummings took too much liquor aboard, involved himself in trouble with the Mannings and was killed by Jim Manning.

After Stoudenmire returned to town he became more bitter than ever against the Mannings and often threatened to clean up the whole bunch. The Mannings were no less talkative with reference to what they proposed to do to Dallas Stoudenmire. It was not long before we went to town that they had trouble. For some reason Stoudenmire, who was drinking heavily, went into their saloon. It didn't take long for trouble to come to the top, being brought there by Doctor Manning. Again Jim Manning scored another notch when he shot Stoudenmire while the officer was wrestling with the other brother.

Stoudenmire's deputy who succeeded him was Jim Gillett an ex-ranger and a fine man. Gillett was anxious to give up his job and go to ranching, but he was a conscientious man, a splendid officer and unwilling to quit until he had the assurance that his successor would be a man of character, courage and ability, able to cope with the situation and acceptable to the people of El Paso. Knowing what was required father applied for the job. Gillett concluded that father would do and wanting to get out himself he resigned.

SELMAN MADE MARSHAL OF EL PASO

I don't know why my father sought and accepted the honor as city marshal of El Paso. I suspect he was not adverse to a little gun play, once in a while.

I will say a word about the customs of the good citizens of El Paso during those wild days on the border. Every man who was old enough to wear long trousers drank his whiskey straight and wore a gun on his hip.

The old-timers did not talk much about

their gun battles. My father went up against the best of them but he always referred to these scraps as just "getting tangled up in a gun-fight."

All of these old-timers drank considerably and yet I never saw one of them drunk. Those who got noisy and drunk were mostly cowboys who had been out on the range for months.

The first night he served as marshal, father had trouble with some hombre who wanted to be considered poison. In fact he stated specifically what he intended to do to the new marshal. Father went into the saloon where he was boasting and called his hand. He had to try to make good his threats. Father beat him to the draw and dropped him with one shot.

Not long afterward a large band of saddle horses were stolen somewhere across the line and brought to El Paso. Some Mexican officers and a posse of vaqueros were close behind the thieves when they crossed the river. In El Paso they appealed to father to take up the pursuit. He and a posse of cowboys followed the thieves. Early the next morning they came upon the thieves and engaged them in battle. Four of the thieves were killed and four were arrested.

One night, shortly after this, father passed a dark alley on South Santa Fe Street on his way home. At this point some one connected with the horse theft struck him over the head with an iron bar. While he was unconscious his assailant stabbed him several times through the shoulders and neck. One such wound passed nearly through his neck and barely missed the jugular vein.

When he recovered from his wounds he took a job driving a herd from Abilene, Texas, to the Sacramento mountains. His outfit was made up of thirty cowboys and two chuck wagons. After finishing this job he felt equal to the task and resumed his duties in El Paso. After policing the town for a while he again took a job of dividing up ten thousand head of cattle for Irvin and Moore. These cattle, too, were in the Sacramentos.

When we returned from the mountains we found that El Paso was enjoying a boom. Large buildings were under construction and a number of business men from the East had come to El Paso to locate. The fall election was only a few days away and father's friends prevailed on him to make the race for constable of the first precinct on the Democratic ticket. He led the ticket in that election and continued to be elected to the office until the time of his death. His friends presented him a gold star and told him to go to it! He did!

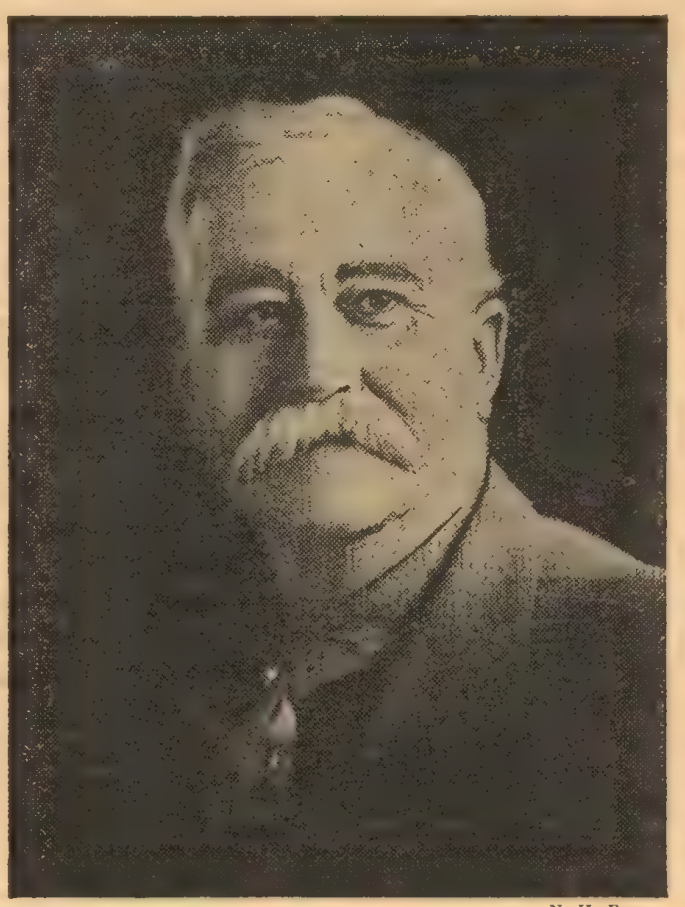
SELMAN KILLS BASS OUTLAW

He had not been a constable long when one hot afternoon while in the Monte Carlo Saloon he heard a whistle blowing from the back porch of Tillie Howard's Parlor House. He crossed through the back way and climbed over the rear fence. Tillie met him back there and told him that Bass Outlaw, a deputy United States Marshal, was inside shooting up the place and that he had just killed a man. Father walked in and saw Joe McKiddrick, a Texas Ranger, lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood. Bass Outlaw was standing near him with his forty-five in his hand. As he was well acquainted with Bass father did not expect any trouble with him.

However, Bass had been drinking and had had trouble with his girl. He threw down on father and fired. The bullet grazed his eyes and blinded him temporarily. Father made a quick draw, fired, and hit Bass over the heart. Bass, turned and ran out of the house and started to climb over a low iron grill fence that was set in a wall around the house. Father ran out and started to follow him. While astraddle the fence Bass saw father coming and fired twice over his shoulder. The bullets hit

father in the leg and cut an artery. Bass then ran up Utah Street toward East Overland Street. Such was the man's vitality that he ran a block after being mortally wounded before he dropped in the street.

Outlaw had come to the frontier from Georgia or Mississippi after the Civil War in which he served with the Confederate States Army. He was one of the most vicious men who had ever appeared in Texas. A wizard with a six-shooter he would ordinarily stay with a fight as long as any man. Wherever he went trouble trailed him. His disposition was so wholly disagreeable that he had been asked to resign from the Rangers since he was always quarreling with the men in camp. Many men were afraid to turn their backs toward him and I have never known a man who claimed to have been his intimate friend. Everybody who knew him always figured he would kill somebody before the next sun. I think he had killed two or three horse thieves at the time father shot it out with him.



N. H. Rose

JEFF D. MILTON
Who was Police Chief of El Paso when Martin McRose was killed crossing from Juarez.

It appears that Joe and Bass were good friends. Joe had gone to Tillie's for the sole purpose of keeping Bass out of trouble. When he tried to get him to leave, Bass cut down on him without giving him a chance.

The wounds father sustained from Outlaw caused him to have to walk with a cane from then on.

His eyes bothered him a lot from the injuries of that first bullet throughout the rest of his life.

The killing of Bass Outlaw put the damper on most of the ambitious gunslingers around El Paso for some time.

About this time father appointed me as one of his deputies.

Events in El Paso, particularly on old Utah Street, were getting so lively that the city fathers concluded the city needed more police. Jeff D. Milton, a Wells-Fargo Express Messenger, was named chief and Joe Chaudoin and I were appointed patrolmen.

The first day on the job I passed the Boss Saloon which was run by a man named Nelson who had the reputation of being a pretty tough hombre. There was a large gang of Mexicans in front of the saloon playing the guitar and singing. They were blocking the sidewalks and I told them to move on. Nelson, who was inside, heard the argument and came out.

"Leave them alone," he said to me. "You so-and-so! Your old man killed my bull dog and I hate you and your whole tribe!"

Instead of arresting Nelson I lost my head, pulled the forty-five I was carrying, and began to beat Nelson over the head with it. He jerked out a small bull-dog pistol but was so busy dodging that he dropped it and I kicked it aside. I gave him a complete pistol whipping.

Father heard about it and came to see me. For the first time in my life he gave me a piece of his mind. He said: "Don't you know what a gun is for! It's not a club! It's to shoot with! The next time I'll expect you to use it as such!"

We police officers worked long hours but there was always something going on and the excitement passed time very swiftly.

WES HARDIN COMES TO EL PASO

The day dawned when we were thrown into a fever of excitement with the news that John Wesley Hardin was coming to town. Wes Hardin had the reputation of having dusted off some twenty-five or thirty men. He had just been pardoned after serving about seventeen of a twenty-five year sentence for killing a deputy sheriff.

I caught my first glimpse of Hardin on San Antonio Street. He was across the street from me and I couldn't help but note the brisk and alert manner in which he carried himself. Hardin dressed in black, soft black felt Stetson hat and black bow tie. He was quite heavily built and a little under six feet in height. At a short distance he gave one the impression that he was smiling but at a closer range his face showed a certain hardness. One had only to look into his keen brown eyes to see that Wes Hardin was a bad man with which to fool. Another thing I noted was that he carried one of his arms slightly raised. The arm was stiff from an old wound.

Hardin had an immediate following wherever he showed up, either at the Wigwam or the Gem Saloon. A crowd would gather and beg for the honor of buying drinks for the great gunman. He took the hero worship as a matter of course.

Hardin started in at once to hit the high spots. He gambled and drank all night and seemed always to have plenty of money. He had not been in El Paso long when one night he showed up and proudly displayed a flashing blond. Of course all of us began asking each other who she was and where she came from.

Never had we gazed upon such a charming beauty. She was a regular Venus and Hardin was genuinely proud of her. A carriage was at her disposal day and night and she spent money recklessly. At last the news leaked out that she was the wife of Martin McRose, who was living across the river with his partner, Vic Queen. We further learned that Martin and Vic were pretty badly wanted by the law up around Eddy, New Mexico, and that there was a large reward for McRose.

The way Hardin and the blond Venus were throwing money away there could only be one ending. They ran short of funds and the next thing we knew Hardin held up the crap game in the Gem Saloon. For this offense a warrant was served the next day by Ed Ten Eyck, a deputy sheriff. We all thought there would be gun-play but Hardin accepted his arrest as meekly as any mortal could.

About this time there was a shakeup in the police department and Edward Fink became chief. I don't know what the trouble was but I believe Jeff D. Milton wanted to get out. The pay was small and a fine man like Milton would want to engage in other work.

I was patrolling my beat down on El Paso Street one night about eleven-thirty when I heard some shooting down by the International Bridge. Shortly after that the news was all over the streets that George Scarborough, Jeff Milton and Frank McMahon had killed Martin McRose. At least, that was the way we first heard it. McRose had been dickering with Scar-

borough for some time to give him safe conduct across the river so he could have a talk with his wife who was then living with Wes Hardin. It seemed that the two men had come to some agreement between themselves and McRose took the fatal chance to see the blond.

Said the *El Paso Daily Herald* of Monday, July 1, 1895:

> Martin McRose, the man who has been much wanted on this side of the river for theft, murder and many other crimes, met his fate last Saturday night at 11:30 at the hands of officers Scarborough, Milton and McMahon. McRose crossed the Mexican Central Bridge to keep an appointment made with Deputy United States Marshal George Scarborough, and had not walked more than 350 feet from the center of the bridge when officers Milton and McMahon threw down on him and ordered him to throw up his hands and consider himself under arrest. Instead of complying with this request, he went for and got his gun, a deadly forty-five caliber Colt revolver. This move on his part cost him his life, as the officers were as quick as he was and the shooting opened and in less than a minute Martin McRose was a dead man—all the shots the officers fired took effect in his body. McRose fired one shot and died with his pistol at full cock in his right hand. The body of the dead desperado was conveyed to the Star Stables Undertaking Rooms where it was laid on the cooling board and was viewed yesterday by a number of people.

At the inquest conducted by Justice Howe Deputy Marshal Scarborough testified that he knew there was a reward for the arrest of McRose, that he had talked to McRose in Juarez and knew that McRose planned to come over to El Paso that particular time. Scarborough testified further that he made the plans for the capture of this outlaw, and that when McRose refused to be captured they were obliged to kill him.

I personally knew all three of the men concerned in the killing. McMahon had been a policeman with me and as for Jeff Milton, he had been my chief and I had nothing but the highest regard for him. As for George Scarborough, my father and I both classed him as our best friend and it was pretty hard to believe the tales that were going the rounds that Martin McRose had been betrayed and killed. I do know that these rumors got to a point where Wes Hardin had to make a public retraction in one of the newspapers with reference to some pointed remarks he had made about hiring Scarborough and Milton to kill McRose.

Hardin and the blond did not help matters any by their conduct. After McRose was killed they drove by the undertaking parlor across the street from the city hall and both were well lit up.

Hardin started drinking more heavily and the blond appeared more in public.

Milton testified at the inquest that he knew about Scarborough making arrangements for McRose to come across the river and that he and McMahon had agreed to help Scarborough arrest the outlaw on this side of the river. "Scarborough," testified Milton, "told us that McRose would be over Saturday night. We went to the place where he was to cross the river and Scarborough placed McMahon and myself alongside of the trail where he was to come up the Santa Fe dump so we could get the drop on McRose. Scarborough came along the trail with McRose following him and stopped on the dump. At that instant McMahon and myself arose and yelled to McRose, 'throw up your hands and consider yourself under arrest!' All of us told him to throw up his hands, but instead of throwing up his hands he pulled his pistol —I shot him once."

McMahon testified to about the same set of facts as did Milton.

Rumor was current in town that George Scarborough had agreed to give McRose safe conduct into El Paso in order that the killer might talk with his wife. This rumor caused the newspaper reporters to locate her and obtain a statement.

Vic Queen, his partner in crime, sent a letter to the *El Paso Daily Herald* from Juarez in which he said:

"Six or eight days ago George Scarborough began a systematic course of deception to inveigle Martin McRose into going across the river, on a pretense of getting a division of the community money that his wife had in her possession."

Queen referred to Scarborough, Milton and McMahon as "these high-handed murderers in the guise of government officers."

After the death of McRose, Hardin settled down to a steady round of drinking. The queen appeared alone more frequently and was still spending money lavishly.

YOUNG SELMAN ARRESTS HARDIN'S MISTRESS

I do not remember what the charge was but one evening Ed Fink and Captain Carr came to me on El Paso Street and said: "Come on, John. We're going down to arrest Wes Hardin."

We went to his hotel. Hardin was alone at the time. We walked in and Chief Fink spoke to him: "Hardin we have come to arrest you. You'll have to go with us."

Of course, we were expecting gun-play. Captain Carr stood on one side of the chief and I stood on the other. To our surprise Hardin offered no resistance. Instead he begged the chief not to take him to jail stating that he was sick. He agreed to appear in the police court the next evening and did.

Less than a month later Fink again called me to go with him and arrest Hardin. We met Captain Carr and Joe Chaudoin and the four of us went to the Acme Saloon. The chief told us to be careful, that he had received information Hardin was armed and intended to shoot it out with us. We found Hardin in a wine room. He was sitting with his back to the wall, and with both hands under the table. While the chief and Carr did the talking Joe and I got on each side of the table. This time Hardin was not so tame. He was feeling better. I could see his eyes glittering like those of a snake ready to strike.

Fink told him: "You're under arrest!"

Hardin looked us over very coolly for a moment and then answered, "All right."

He stood up and laid two forty-fives on the table saying, "If it were not for Joe here, watching me so damn close, I would have killed the whole damn bunch of you!"

He meant it, too! We took him to the City Hall and booked him, but he was released. I have forgotten what the charge was but it was something light entailing a fine.

It became known that McRose had left about five thousand dollars in insurance. His widow was his beneficiary and Hardin was her attorney Possibly I have not mentioned it, but Hardin had studied law while in prison and was admitted a member of the Texas bar. He left town for Eddy, New Mexico, presumably to attend to this matter. He had hardly gotten out of town when the queen went on a big spree and wound up down on San Antonio Street in Billy Ritchie's restaurant.

There she made a gun play. I was passing at the time and saw her through the large glass window. Billie was standing facing the street with his hands up. The queen was holding a pair of guns on him. The door was open so I walked in, very quietly and stepping up behind her I encircled her with my arms and squeezed her so hard she dropped the guns on the floor. They were a beautiful pair of matched Colt's forty-ones, pearl-handled.

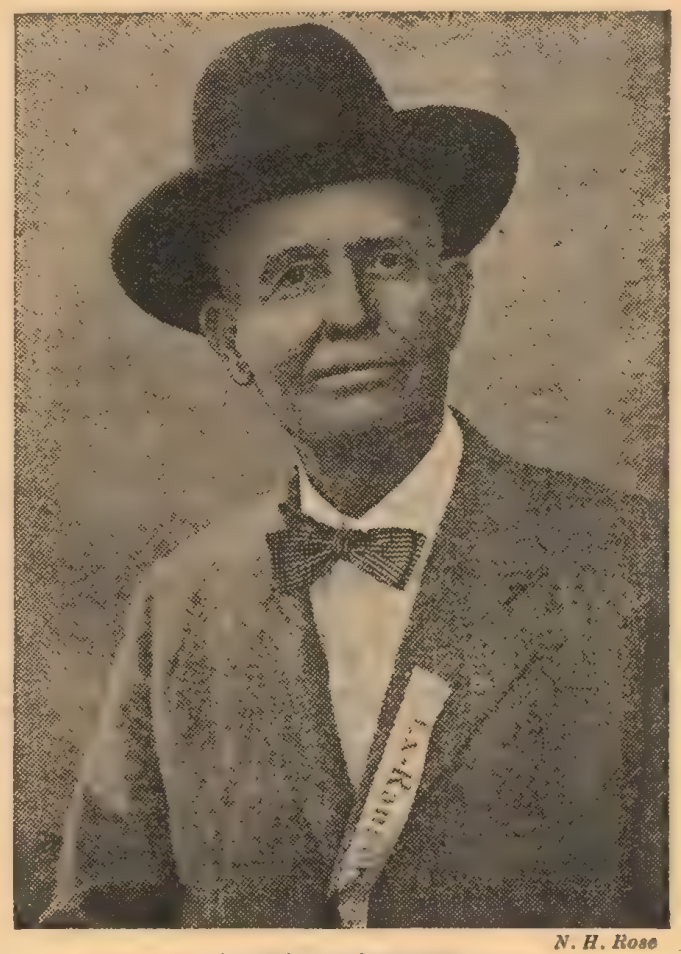
I took her to jail and had the jailer hold her in the office for a couple of hours and then release her on a cash bond.

The next evening she entered a plea of guilty to carrying a gun and paid a fine of fifty dollars. She did not hold any ill feeling against me and treated it all as a huge joke. A few days later, it was Saturday afternoon, as I was standing in front of the Parlor Saloon, she drove by in an open hack. When she saw me she called to me to take a ride with her. I shook my head. She then stood up in the hack and waving

a large roll of bills toward me called out: "I'll give you five hundred dollars if you'll take a ride with me."

Things were very quiet about town while Hardin was absent. It seemed that everybody, even the queen, breathed a little easier. But all at once, he was back again. He did not say anything at the time. He had only been back a few days when, walking through the Plaza, I met him. The queen was with him. I thought to myself "here is where the test will come." But he spoke very pleasantly and did not mention anything about the arrest. I passed on, but believe me I breathed easier after I was safely away.

A few nights later father told me that Hardin had done some talking about the arrest of the queen. I met Joe Chaudoin and he asked me if I had heard about Hardin and father having trouble.



N. H. Rose

JAMES B. GILLETTE

Noted Texas Ranger who at one time was Marshal of El Paso and who was succeeded by John Selman.

JOHN SELMAN KILLS WES HARDIN

I had not heard and Joe told me, "They had it out over you arresting his woman. Hardin has gone home to get his guns and Uncle John is looking for him!"

"You know, Joe," I said, "he can't see very well after dark and he won't have a chance with Hardin. I'm going to find him, right now!"

Joe went with me. We went to the Ruby and several other places and I was getting in a blue funk when we met someone who told us that he had just seen father going toward the Acme.

We almost ran. When we got within a few feet of the door I heard the first shot. I ran through the swinging doors, gun in hand, but I wasn't needed. Hardin was lying on the floor, face up and father was standing a few feet away.

I sheathed my gun and took father by the arm. "Don't shoot any more," I said to him, "he's dead now."

I took father's gun and started out with him. Before I left I looked at Hardin, his coat was open and I plainly saw the handles of two guns either in the waistband of his trousers or in his hip pockets.

When I got father a little piece away from the Acme we stopped. While he rolled a Bull Durham cigarette I loaded his gun from my belt. He was sober and not a bit nervous. We stepped into Walter Earhart's Saloon and had a drink with Bob

Austin, who was tending bar. From there we went to the City Hall where I booked my father. There on the blotter for August 19, 1895, is this entry:

> John Selman—Arrested by J. M. Selman. Charge — Manslaughter. Released on own recognizance.

By this time there was a big crowd around the City Hall. When we came out I turned father over to a Mr. Ponder, reporter for the *El Paso Times.*

Going back down San Antonio Street I met Chief Fink and Captain Carr and made a report about releasing father. Then I went to the *Times* office where father made a statement and took him to our home on Chihuahua Street.

I don't know why, but I expected Mannen Clements, a cousin of Hardin's, to take it up and Clements had a bad reputation as an unfair fighter. I returned to the Acme and found that Hardin had been removed to an undertaking establishment. It was very quiet around the Acme. Although the usual crowd was at the bar drinking no comment was made while I was there.

On August 20, 1895, the *Times* said:

> Last night between 11 and 12 o'clock San Antonio Street was thrown into an intense state of excitement by the sound of four pistol shots that occurred at the Acme Saloon. Soon the crowd surged against the door and there right inside lay the body of John Wesley Hardin, his blood flowing over the floor and his brains oozing out of a pistol shot wound that had passed through his head.
>
> Soon the facts became generally known that John Selman, Constable of Precinct No. 1, had fired the fatal shots that had ended the career of so noted a character as Wes Hardin, by which name he is better known to all old Texas.
>
> For several weeks past, trouble has been brewing and it has often been heard on the streets that John Wes Hardin would be the cause of some killing before he left town. Only a short time ago, Policeman Selman arrested Mrs. McRose, the mistress of Hardin and she was tried and convicted of carrying a pistol. This arrest angered Hardin and when he was drinking, he often made remarks that showed he was bitter in his feeling against young John Selman. Selman paid no attention to these remarks, but attended to his duties and said nothing. Later, Hardin became louder in his abuse and was very quarrelsome, even getting along badly with some of his friends. This quarrelsome disposition on his part resulted in his death last night, and is a sad warning to all such parties that the rights of others must be respected, and that the day is past when a person having a name of being a bad man can run rough shod over the law and the rights of other citizens.

Early the next morning my father made the following statement concerning the shooting. This statement he signed and it was published. He said:

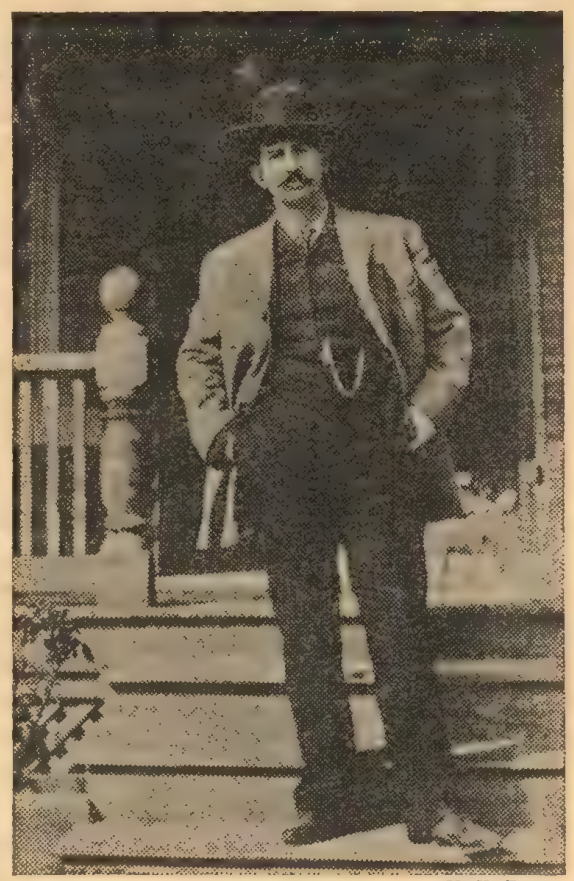
"I met Wes Hardin about 7 o'clock last evening close to the Acme Saloon. When we met Hardin said: 'You've got a son that's a bastardly, cowardly —— —— ——!' I said, 'Which one?' Hardin said, 'John, the one that's on the police force. He pulled in my woman while I was absent and robbed her of $50, which he wouldn't have done if I had been here.' I said: 'Hardin, there is no man on earth that can talk about my children like that without fighting, you cowardly —— —— ——!' Hardin said, 'I am unarmed.' I said 'Go and get your gun; I am armed!' Then he said: 'I'll go and get my gun and when I meet you I'll meet you smoking!'

"Hardin then went into the Acme Saloon and began shaking dice with Henry Brown. I sat down then on a beer barrel in front of the Acme and waited for Hardin to come out of the saloon. I insisted on the police force keeping out of the trouble, as it was a personal matter between Hardin and myself. Hardin had insulted me personally. About 11 o'clock, Mr. E. L. Shackelford came along and met me on the sidewalk. He said: 'Hello!' and asked me what I was doing. Then Shackelford insisted on me going inside and taking a drink. But I said, 'No, I do not want to go in there as Hardin is in there and I am afraid we will have trouble.'

"Shackelford then said, 'Come on and take a drink anyhow, but don't get drunk.'

Shackelford led me into the saloon by the arm. We went to the far end of the bar and took a drink. Hardin and Brown were shaking dice at the end of the bar next to the door. While we were drinking I noticed Hardin was watching me very closely. When Hardin thought my eye was off of him he made a break for his gun in his hip pocket and I immediately pulled my gun and began shooting .

"I shot him in the head first, as I had been informed he wore a steel breast plate. As I was about to shoot the second time someone ran against me and I think I missed him, but the other two shots were at his body and I think I hit him both times. My son then ran in and caught me by the arm. I was not drunk at the time but was crazy mad at the way he had insulted me. My son and myself came out of the saloon together and when Justice Howe came I gave my statement to him. My wife was very weak and was prostrated when I got home. . . . I am sorry I had to kill Hardin, but he had threatened mine and my son's life several times, and I felt it had to come to that point where either he or I had to die."



N. H. Rose

MANNEN CLEMENTS

It was this man whom young Selman thought would kill his father in revenge for the Hardin killing. Clements was a cousin of Hardin's and was himself killed by a saloonman in 1908.

Mr. Shackelford, at the inquest, testified that when he came down town that evening he heard that Hardin had threatened father and that they had had some words. Mr. Shackelford said: "I came over to the Acme Saloon where I met Selman. I told him that I understood there was occasion for him to have trouble, and having heard the character of the man with whom he would have trouble, I advised him, as a friend, not to get under the influence of liquor."

Hardin, at the time of his death, was about 42 years of age. When hardly more than a boy he became a partisan in the Taylor-Sutton feud that was raging in Dewitt County, soon becoming a prominent party and a man of nerve and quick action with a gun. The first man he was known to have killed was Jack Helm, a notorious killer and gunman. Hardin had gone up the Chisholm Trail to Abilene where he tangled ropes with Wild Bill Hickok, got the drop on that blood-stained badge toter and made him back down.

On his trip to Kansas and return he killed about ten men. The number of his victims was variously estimated to be not less than twenty-five and most men who knew him claimed they could tally at least forty. In any event he was "Texas' Champion Badman," as Marshal Jim Gillette had seen fit to brand him. In those days as in this he was acknowledged as the greatest gun-fighter Texas had ever produced, if the greatness of a gun-fighter is determined by

the number of men killed and the attendant publicity that Hardin appeared to adore.

SELMAN IS ACQUITTED

Things moved along and it was nearing time for the Fall term of Court during which father's trial for killing Hardin was to take place. I kept pretty close to him, especially at night. We expected trouble from the Hardin clan and particularly from young Mannen Clements. Father's eyesight was bad at night and I made it a point to go home with him. We were expecting an ambush and we were prepared for it. Nothing happened, however, but as an added precaution I took father's forty-five and had the barrel cut off short so he could carry it in his clothes during the trial. It ended as the story was shortly told in the *El Paso Herald* of April 7, 1896.

> The case against John Selman, charged with murder, in the killing of John Wesley Hardin, last August, was dismissed this morning in the District Court.

After the trial father continued his duties as constable and as nothing unusual took place we relaxed our vigilance.

On the last day of March 1896, on my way to work and before I reached the City Hall I met my girl, the daughter of a local business man. She was very much worried, and told me that she had just heard that her father had been appointed as Mexican Consul to San Salvador. They were getting ready to leave soon.

We talked it over and as I knew the Mayor of Juarez quite well, we decided to go over the river and be married by him.

We went to a family we knew, to wait with them. An hour later a whole squad of police came and arrested us both.

We were taken to jail and detained in the office. It seems that some good old soul over in El Paso had not lost any time in conveying news of the elopement to the girl's mother.

The judge was in sympathy with me and asked me if I was then and there ready to marry the girl. I told him that I was. Then the mother who had come into the room protested so violently there was nothing else to do other than lock me up.

On the afternoon of April 4th, father came to see me. He sat with me all afternoon and when he got ready to go he said: "Well, John, I will be going, but I'll be back tomorrow with George and we will get you out of here."

I remember clearly, to this day, my father's last words to me. He did not say how he was going to do it, but I knew that somehow it would be done. I watched him when he left, through the front entrance of the jail and as he turned the corner of the old Catholic Church. That was the last time I saw him.

GEORGE SCARBOROUGH KILLS JOHN SELMAN

It was Easter morning and I was up early to be ready for father when he came for me. Instead a hack driver came and was let in to see me. He could not keep the news back. As soon as he saw me he shouted: *"Your father is dead! He was shot all to pieces last night by George Scarborough!"*

I was stunned. I could not believe it. My father killed! *And by the one man* father had singled out from his hundreds of friends to come with him to help him get me out of prison. Only a few days before I had ridden thirty miles into Old Mexico with Scarborough after an escaped Federal prisoner. Up to this time I had believed that Scarborough was our friend. The news coupled with my other troubles floored me.

After the funeral Bud came to see me. He said:

"I rushed to the Wigwam Saloon and found father shot and lying on the ground

in the alley. There was a large crowd around him. I knelt down by him and he knew me and said, 'Bud, it's too bad this had to happen. I don't know what became of my gun. If I'd had it things would be different.' "

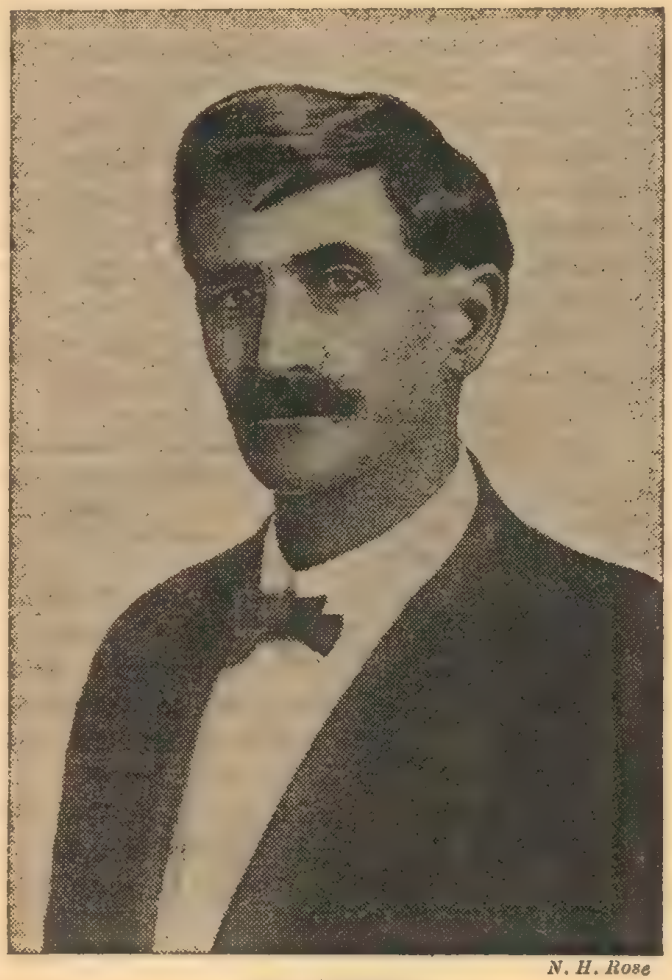
To the best of my knowledge a dance hall bouncer was arrested and brought back to El Paso for the theft of my father's gun while he was standing at the bar in the Acme Saloon, a few minutes before he went out into the alley with Scarborough. I heard some time afterward that this man served a long sentence for the theft of the gun. To my own certain knowledge Scarborough would not have stood a chance in a gun-battle with father.

The real reason my father was killed will never be known. Even I that knew him better than anyone else have never been able to figure out the real reason. But I do remember what happened to Martin McRose!

Friends from El Paso some time later came over to Juarez one night and helped me break out of prison and get back to Texas although we all came near getting killed in the effort.

When I reached El Paso I learned that Scarborough had gone to Deming, New Mexico, to become a cattle detective. I don't know that the killing of my father had anything to do with him leaving town but Dick Ware, the United States Marshal, was a good friend of father's. I suspect that Scarborough was dismissed by him.

I returned to Brown County where I served as a deputy sheriff. One day the sheriff handed me a wire from El Paso and said: "John, you ought to know this fellow. He is wanted in El Paso for stealing a hack and team."



N. H. Rose

PAT GARRETT

The famous Sheriff who killed Billy the Kid in 1881.

I cannot now recall his name but I did know him. He was the man who had stolen father's pistol! I arrested him and wired Frank Simmons, the sheriff at El Paso, that I had his man. That night Sheriff Bell of Brown County, George Batton, the chief deputy and I tried to get a statement from the prisoner about stealing the gun. He admitted he had taken the gun but would not tell us why. I then had the gun in my possession and showed it to him. He readily admitted that was the gun and continued his silence.

Scarborough had made a statement about the killing. This statement our friends then and now insist is too unreasonable to be the truth.

According to Scarborough's statement, father without any cause or provocation whatsoever, attempted to kill him in the alley after he had agreed with father that he would go across the river and help get me out of jail. He admitted they had not had any previous trouble and said in part: "He (Selman) then said, 'let's go in and have a drink.' I told him that I didn't want anything to drink. *He threw his hand on his six-shooter* and said: 'You — —— ——— I am going to kill you!' I jerked my gun with my right hand."

Can it be possible that father reached for an empty holster and Scarborough thought he had his gun? The real cause of father's death will probably never be known. But —when Wes Hardin came to town everybody believed that Scarborough had him staked out as his especial prey. Gunfighters are jealous. Scarborough had reason to resent the fact that father dusted Hardin off before he had a chance at him. At any rate, George Scarborough killed an unarmed man! Said the *El Paso Daily Herald*:

> The loss of Selman's gun has caused several wild rumors to get afloat that might prejudice the case one way or the other, but the party that has Selman's gun will appear at the proper time, as it was said to be known who has the gun.

I only saw George Scarborough once after that. I was deputy sheriff at Geronimo, Arizona, and at the train to meet the sheriff when who should step off with him but George Scarborough. George started toward me and I reached for my gun. Ben Clark, the sheriff, stepped between us saying: "For God's sake, John, don't have trouble here!" Clark was my chief, Scarborough was his guest. Clark took Scarborough across the street to the hotel and kept him there until his train left.

A couple of years later I was in the army. In the Philippines one day a fellow soldier, Tom Pendergrast of La Luz, New Mexico, came running to my tent with a month old El Paso newspaper. "John!" he exclaimed, "what do you know! George Scarborough is dead! He was shot all to pieces near Deming!"

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 15 No. 43

BUSINESS BOOMING

Big Deal In Horses

Just to show you folks that there is no hard times, as some is saying, let me tell you that the biggest deal in years was pulled off recently. In fact, it maybe set a new record for high finance (or maybe for lying) in these parts. Anyways, it ran into millions of dollars.

Kingpin Kelly was the gent who put me wise to it. You see, a while back Kingpin was looking around for a horse for his youngest boy to ride. And because his boy is only two years old, Kingpin wanted to get a cayuse that was plumb gentle and maybe a little bit wore out from being old, which kind of a animal is pretty hard to find around Cactus City account of everybody being pretty proud as to what kind of horseflesh they tie their kack onto. So it looked like Kingpin would have to go over to Mesa Springs (where even the horses are third rate and mangy) to get the right kind of caballo for his kid.

Howsoever, Kingpin one day happened to be riding by Harmless Hogan's place and he saw just the horse he wanted to buy (or steal if he got the chance.) It was a flea-bit and swayback mare who could still see out of one eye a little and who was considerable past the age when fillies get frivolous in the spring. So Kingpin rode in and inquired.

Well, Harmless allowed that he would sell the mare all right, and after a reasonable amount of horse-trading preliminaries, Kingpin inquired what was the asking price. Without batting an eye, Harmless declares that he won't part with the mare for a cent less than five million dollars ($5,000,000.)

Naturally, Kingpin saw that Harmless was just a little locoer than usual that day,

(Page 2, column 3)

BIG FIRE

Heroic Rescue

It looks to me like the Ladies' Sociable Society is going to a lot of trouble that they don't need to go to. They been agitating around that a Medal of Heroism ought to be given to Tightwad Wallace. He risked life and limb, they say, in the cause of humanity. (Yeah, them's their exact words.)

Well, such sentiments is all nice and pretty, but I will have to admit that Tightwad did rush into a blazing shanty and rescue Delirium Deabill, who was dead drunk and unconscious that his shanty was afire. Also I will admit that Tightwad risked life and limb. But, I claim, he didn't do it in the cause of humanity.

Tightwad hisself gave away the real reason for said heroism when he rushed Delirium to the Doc for treatment. Very anxious and nervous, Tightwad says with tears in his eyes, "Doc, don't let this man die. The son-of-a-buck owes me five dollars."

CLOSE SHAVE

A smarty tourist sure cracked the whip on Cross-cut Kane the other day. This tourist dude went into the Gem Barber Shop and Baths and ordered himself a shave. Cross-cut lathered him up good and commenced operations with his usual enthusiasm. But he no sooner got started than the tourist gent commenced squirming around and ducking away from the razor.

This surprised Cross-cut very much, as he was giving one of his very best shaves. However, just to be polite he asks, "Am I bearing down a little too hard?"

"Well—yes and no," comes back the dude. "I mean, if you're trying to shave me—yes. But if you're aiming to skin me—no."

UTAH TIMMONS FREED

Justifiable Homicide

It didn't take the jury very long to set Utah Timmons free. The charge, you know, was that Utah killed Slicker Sloan during a poker game. Utah admitted the killing all right, but he claimed it was legal account of he caught Slicker cheating.

The evidence turned out all in favor of Utah. Eye witnesses testified that at the showdown for the pot, Slicker held four Kings and that Utah held four Queens. Also they testified that Utah had dealt the cards.

Now, everybody knows that a man wouldn't deal somebody else a better hand than he was dealing to hisself, except accidently. And Utah hisself testified that he was positive he had dealt four Jacks to Slicker. So it was plain to see that Slicker had cheated and therefore the killing was plumb justified and legal.

BULL BILLINGS TO SING

Next Thursday the Cactus City Amateur Musical Society will throw their first (and maybe last) Amateur Concert. One of the main events will be Bull Billings singing a bass solo, which will probably be the highlight of the evening. In fact, folks can hardly wait until Bull gets up on his hind legs to perform. Short-weight Weston has already sent to Yuma for something special to mark the occassion. He ordered three cases of guaranteed rotten eggs.

The eggs will be on sale at Short-weight's store all day Thursday. However, he is limiting each customer to two dozen, so that everybody can have some ammunition—and fun.

EDITORIAL

Things has sure come to a pretty pass in Cactus County! Yes, I am referring to the coming election. It seems that there is at least half a dozen offices that nobody is running for, and the reason they ain't is very plain to be seen, even by somebody who can't see very good. Everybody wants to be Sheriff or Treasurer. There is 573 hombres running for Sheriff and 508 for Treasurer. Why hell, there is hardly enough votes to go around. That is, if everybody only voted once, which of course they won't do.

Of course, ambition is a noble thing, and there is no denying the fact that whoever is Sheriff or Treasurer is in a position to do more high-grading than any other County Officer. But you rannyhans has got to remember that politics is like anything else, you got to start in at the bottom. Even tophands like the Dalton Boys and Butch Cassidy started their careers with small jobs and worked up.

For instance, take the job of County Clerk. There is a swell chance for some young buck to learn the business. Of course, the Clerk can only clear maybe a couple hundred dollars every month besides the salary, but that is a pretty fair start for a gent who never has had much experience in grafting before.

And then there is the job of Supervisor for the Tailholt District. Nobody is running for this office because that Dist. includes only Little Tijuana and the Reservation. Nobody seems to think that job is any good, but I had it a few years ago, you remember, so I know. You will be plumb surprised to learn just how much you can squeeze out'n those Indians and Mex's.

Also there are several more such offices that has got to be filled, and if you coyotes had any Civic Pride and sense, you would quit trying to get elected Treasurer and go in for something that there ain't so much competition for. There is only going to be one (1) Treasurer and one (1) Sheriff, you know, so unless some of you gents change your mind you will get left out of Politics entirely and will have to work for a living.

Besides, if too many men is running for the same office, why votes will be sky-high by election time, and nobody will know where they stand. Always when there is too many in the race there is lots of underhand fernangling and dirty work. If some of you would just resign from the Treasurer's race, for instance, and leave Judd Ovitt and me and a few other old-timers to fight it out, why we could get together and set a decent price on votes. That would cut out any behind-the-back price-raising and other unfair tactics. Then the election would be fair and square and may the best man win. (Who is, of course, yours truly, Bronco Blynn.)

You renegades wouldn't like Cactus County to get the name of being a crooked and outlaw community, would you? Well then, let's see some of you get a little Civic Pride into you and run for some office which may not offer such choice pickings right now, but which will lead to bigger and better things.

PERSONALS

In the interest of science and curiosity, Camel Collins made a very interesting experiment the other morning. While Wun Wing, the Flying W cook, was fixing breakfast, Camel took an old saddle blanket and cut some round pieces out of it. Watching his chance, Camel distributed the pieces of old saddle blanket in the stack of hotcakes which the Chink had fried, then sat back to check the results—in the interest of science and curiosity.

However, Camel was plumb disappointed. The only comment made by the boys who ate hotcakes was that they was extra delicious that morning.

FOR SALE:
4 Decks Marked Cards, 1 Double Faro Box, 1 .41 Derringer
Mrs. Slicker Sloan

T-bone Tillie, the hash-slinging sireen, says that she is getting plump from natural causes and not from what a lot of sharp-tongue old female busybodies say she is getting plump from. She is going on a diet, Tillie declares, just to prove to the local gossips that she ain't going to get married or something.

LEGAL NEWS AND NOTICES

Judge Joker Jameson has ruled that Grizzlr Greer is not guilty of "assault with a deadly weapon," which was the charge made by Hackamore Henry. A flour sack, says the Judge, is not a deadly weapon, and what the hell difference does it make that said flour sack happened to wropped around a pick-handle at a time of said assault.

(Continued from page 1, column 1)

so he humored the old coot and said he would have to think it over. Which same he did for a couple weeks, and then, figuring that Harmless had calmed down some, he rode out again to make a deal. But much to his surprise, Harmless told him that the mare had been sold already.

Kingpin was considerable put out, of course, because it looked like after all he would have to ride over to Mesa Springs (where you can't hardly tell the citizens from the coyotes excepting that the citizens walk around on their hind legs) to buy his boy a horse.

But just out of curiosity, he asked old Harmless what price he got for the mare, and Harmless answers right back that he got his original price — $5,000,000. Now of course, Kingpin knew that there ain't that much money in the world, let alone in Cactus City, so he asked for particulars.

"I tell yuh, I got $5,000,000," hollers Harmless, just as if somebody was doubting his word. "The hombre I sold her to gave me $5 in cash and a pedigree hound dog which he said was worth $4,999,995."

(Well, Harmless's arithmetic was correct anyways.)

The ASTER BOYS

They tried to burn the cabin down.

A High and Short Novel

by J. E. GRINSTEAD

"Hiram, son," drawled Short, in his deepest, most preacher-like tones, "Texas is the biggest and best thing in the world. People has come here from everywhere in the world, but they's still room here west of the Pecos to rope a yearlin' and throw it without knockin' down a house. Room to mount a braunk, and let it do a little crow-hoppin', without messin' up the flower-beds."

"Shore," grinned High. "Room for a lot of sidewinders and vinagaroons, too, and maybe a thief and killer once in a while."

"No, Hiram, you are wrong. Time was when Texas had a bad name, but them

High And Short Were Looking For A Peaceful Country And They Almost Had It Until They Met Up With Old Man Dis Aster's Boys

old days of devilment is passed, and—"

Wham!

A gun cracked, and a little wreath of smoke rose from a patch of chaparral three hundred yards away, to the right of the trail on which the partners were riding west. The bullet struck the ground just in front of them, and they pulled up. The gun spat again, and the bullet cut dust just behind them.

"Good Old Texas," grinned High. "They's just two ways to go from here—straight up and sideways. You can stay right here and go straight up, if you want to. I'm goin' sideways." High whirled his mount, and headed south.

"Just a moment, Hiram," said Short. "Don't be too impetuous. Them shots was just a warnin'. A sorty grand hailin' sign that's popular in this country. Maybe they ain't—" Short stopped, as ten men rode out of that thicket, and more shots cut dirt all around them. "Hiram, you may be right. Those gentlemen seem to be angry about something."

High didn't hear that last remark. He was gone south, and Short was doing his best to keep up with him, while the men came storming on, yelling and shooting as they came. The country was open, smooth, and gently sloping to the south. The partners had run a mile, and had gained a little on their pursuers. There was not a thing in the way of seeing them except some short grass and a few horned toads. Suddenly, High saw a gash in the ground, and wanted to get into it. He found a place two hundred yards below the head of the little gorge where a lizzard could have gone down without danger to life and limb. Down it they went, gaining the bottom of the gorge, which was the head of a draw that ran to the Rio Grande. Up the gorge they flew, gaining a great mass of boulders that had broken off the fifty-foot bluff and fallen.

"All right," snapped High, as they slid from their saddles and ran in behind those rocks. "Grab yo' carbine, and let's get behind them rocks before company comes. Don't you reck'n them are rangers, Short?"

"No, Hiram, them ain't rangers. If they were, they wouldn't kill a couple of pore, innocent pilgrims."

"They ain't kilt us—yet" chuckled High. "They didn't have enough powder behind them bullets to make 'em keep up with us."

"Hiram, son, this is no time for levity. I'm puzzled about the behavior of those gentlemen. Will you stick your head up over that bluff, and see what is in the offing?"

"Stick your own head up there," jeered High. "It ain't bigger than a BB shot. They can't hit it. If they do, it will be just as good as new—for thinking purposes."

"Shut up," snarled Short. "If you had any sense at all, we wouldn't be in this hole, as much good running ground as we had."

"Yeah," jeered High. "If you thought you could outrun them bullets, why didn't you keep on goin'. I didn't invite you in here. As soon as you sees this scratch on Old Mother Nature's face, you tried to beat me into it. You long-laigged he ape. This is what I get for follerin' you into what you calls virgin territory. If them gents is a sample of the virgins in this section I wants out of it as quick—Hush. Listen!"

There was the sound of hoofs out above the bluff at the head of the draw. A moment later, a big voice roared:

"All right, fellers. We got 'em holed up. All we got to do now is twist 'em out, just like rabbits."

"I'll bet I ain't like no rabbit," grinned High. "If them gents will give me a fifty-foot start, I'll outrun a telegram, from here to the Pecos, and a rabbit can't do that."

"Shut up, you dang fool," whispered Short. "I'm skeered as bad as you are, but I ain't braggin' about it. See what them gents is sayin'. Maybe we can prove a alibi, or something."

"Hold on a minute, Mel," called another voice out there on the high ground. "Are you plumb shore that them two gents is who you think they are?"

"Of course I'm shore," replied Mel Rice. "Didn't I get the straight dope from Big

Mike, the bartender at San Miguel? Mike says a ranger company has came into the Big Bend, and the Cap'n is boasting that he aims to get the Mel Rice Gang. Them two gents is ranger scouts. They are trying to see what they can see, and—they've done saw it."

"Maybe so," grunted Mel's companion, "but I never seen a ranger run like that before."

"A ranger ain't no different from nobody else," sneered Mel Rice, notorious outlaw, wanted on both sides of the Rio Grande. "Rangers is men, and when they are skeered, they runs. You can't hardly tell a ranger from a human, nowhere except in story books. When they sees ten of us, and only two of them, they acts natural, and runs. They are in that draw, and we are goin' to get 'em, and get 'em good."

"All right, Mel," said the other man. "You are the doctor. If they went into that draw they are still in there, for I can see down it for five mile, and they's nobody in sight."

"Fine," said Mel. "Two of you stay up here. Four of us will go down each side of the draw. When we get to where we can get down the bank, we'll smoke 'em out, and you boys pot 'em as they come up the bluff."

"Hiram, son," said Short, mournfully, "have you got anything on you that would prove that we ain't rangers?"

"No," replied High, as he listened to the thud of hoofs going down the draw on each side, but too far away for the riders to be seen. "If the way we outruns them bullets, and one look at you, wouldn't convince 'em, the case is hopeless."

"Hiram, if we could just convince them gents that we ain't rangers, we could—"

"Get shot for foolin' 'em," jeered High. "We ain't got no time to argue. Our braunks is hid up in that patch of chaparral down the draw a ways. Burrow into them rocks, and get ready to die as much like a human as you can. If you got any scruples agin dying with yo' boots on, you better pull 'em off."

"Hiram, son," mourned Short, as he folded his long legs, and crouched behind the rocks, "if I should manage to get out of this mess by superior intelligence, or something, and you don't, is they something that you'd want me to tell yo' folks? I mean that you died like a true Texan, and things like that."

"No," snapped High. "If I see that we ain't going to get out of here whole, I aim to use my last ca'tridge to kill you for leading me into a mess like this. Look out! Yonder they come."

"Those Gents Will Be In Mexico In Five Minutes"

Mr. Rice and his merry men had got down into the gorge, almost half a mile below the head, and now were storming up it, looking in vain for the two men that they had run into it.

"Hiram, son," said Short, as he raised the sights on his carbine, "I'm skeered worse than I been since Jim Beaver's bull hooked me in the pants, but I aim to fire at least one shot, like a true Texan. My fambly could always shoot, no matter how damn bad they was skeered, and I aims to keep up the tradition."

"Shut up yawpin," snapped High, "and work that gun. They are close enough, now."

Two puffs of smoke billowed out from behind those rocks, and two horses went down, leaving their riders to do the best they could on foot. The other six came on, and were well within a hundred yards of the two drifters, when those guns cracked again. Two men went from their

saddles that time. The other four checked and whirled about. High and Short followed up their advantage. The gorge was full of smoke, for the outlaws had been firing as they came on, and plenty of the bullets had knocked bits of dust and stone on the two crouching drifters. The Rice gang were doing no shooting, now, except to shoot down that gorge as fast as they could, while High and Short helped them along with whining bullets, until the magazines of their guns were empty.

"Hold the deal," grinned High. "Them gents will be in Mexico in five minutes, the way they are goin', but we may meet some more, out here in this rarefied atmosphere. We—Listen!"

"We ain't had very good luck," mourned Short. "We gets only two out of a possible ten."

"Shut up, and listen, I tell you."

Out on the wild escarpment, above the head of the gorge, the two men who had been left to do the potting, were talking.

"Look!" said one. "Mel and the boys is high-tailin' it out of that draw. They's only six of 'em. I'll bet they jumped a whole damn company of rangers in there."

"Watch 'em," said the other man. "They are climbing out of the draw. They'll be back here in a minute."

"Hell they will," snarled the other man. "They are up out of the draw, and turned south toward the river."

"Look out, Short," said High. "I'm going to see can I raise our average a coupla points."

High was climbing the bluff like a mountain goat, while Short held his gun on the top of the bluff, just in case the men tried to look over. The two watchers had given up, and turned away, when High's gun cracked. One of them reeled in his saddle and clutched the saddlehorn. They were gone like the wind, but that gun cracked again, and the sound one dropped an arm to his side, as they tore away down the draw, in a mad effort to overtake Mel Rice and the others, and go wherever they were going.

"Hiram," said Short, "I'll bet you my last four bits agin a lead nickel, that them gents *still* thinks we are rangers."

"Yes, and if you wouldn't been in such a hell of a hurry to show what a good Texan you was, we could got more of 'em. Next time, I want you to wait until I say, 'Fire when you are ready, Gridley,' and don't shoot then unless you can see the whites of their eyes, plumb plain."

"Why, you dang little short-measure wart," snorted Short. "You was the one that started the first smoke."

"I believe I was," grinned High, "but I was skeered some. We could of done better, at a shorter range."

"Hiram, I want to apologize for leading you into this country. It ain't what I thought it was. I'm willing to turn back, and go east of the Pecos."

"I don't reck'n I could do that," said High, thoughtfully. "If I knowed that gent I has that argument with in San Miguel was goin' to live and do well, I might, but—I reck'n we better go west. According to yo' tell, they's a ranch about fifteen mile west of here, where we could eat, and sorty get over our skeer."

The partners got their mounts out of the draw, mounted and angled back toward the trail that they had been following when they were interrupted by whining lead. Back in the dusty old trail again, they had ridden a mile before either of them spoke. At long last, High said:

"Short, it's funny how a feller gets stuck on his home state, and thinks all the rest of the world is badlands, and all the rest of the people is heathens. Most of the people in Texas comes from some other state. Take yo' family, now. They—"

"Hiram, son, my fambly was Texas pioneers. My grammaw made a pair of socks

for Jefferson Davis, when he was a young looey, in the U. S. Army, stationed at a Texas fort. My grampaw was a minister of the gospel, who leaves Arkansaw account of some dissention in his church that—"

"Shore," grinned High. "I heared that the dissention was that the folks couldn't make up their minds whether to shoot him, hang him, or turn him over to the revenuers, for makin' the moonshine in the day time. So, while they argues the point, he goes to Texas."

"Hiram, son," droned Short, "this is no time to get personal."

"Oh, I don't aim to give no offense. I was just trying to help you sprout another limb on yo' fambly tree. Now, my grandpappy was a pioneer, too. He comes out'n east Kaintucky. Up to the time he starts to Texas, he had never been farther away from his cabin than his still. He left that country account of a misunderstanding with a coupla revenue men. The reason they couldn't understand grandpappy was that they was dead. Something about that misunderstanding gives grandpappy a desire for the freedom of the wide places, and he comes to Texas. He—Oh, oh. There's a windmill peeping at us over that next ridge."

"That, Hiram, is the ranch that I told you about. It is marked on my waybill as a place where we can get food and succor for the night."

"Shore," grinned High. "They'll have a coupla suckers when we gets there."

They jogged on west, reaching the ranch cabin some time before sunset. There was no one about the place. Not even a horse in the pens, or a saddle on the fence.

"Huh," grunted Short. "Looks like they ain't nobody at home. Let's go in and take a look."

"Hold on, Short," said High. "Don't be too sudden. We done made enough mistakes for one day. If we go bulgin' in there without knockin', we are apt to get a wedge of bullet pie, with smoke stuffin' for lunch."

They hailed the little ranch house again and again, but got no reply. Finally, they dismounted and went in. There was every indication that some one lived there. Food was on the shelves in the kitchen, and a coffeepot stood on the rusty little cookstove. In a corner of the main room was a baby's cradle, and the garments of a woman hung on the wall.

"The home of a trusty pioneer and his faithful wife," said Short, in a musing tone. "I'll rustle some grub, Hiram, while you stake the braunks on some good grass, but— Don't go too far. Them braunks is tired."

High found good grass a few hundred yards down a draw, west of the cabin, and a little thicket in which to hide their saddles. When High got back to the house, he crept up and peered in at Short, who was standing in the kitchen, with the coffeepot in his hand. High spoke, and Short dropped the vessel with a crash:

"Here," he snarled, "what the hell you mean sneakin' up on me like that? Don't you know it ain't polite?"

"Shore," chuckled High," but I didn't think it would make any difference, when they ain't nobody at home."

SHEET LEAD CRUST

When the partners had finished a hearty meal of ranch fare, High rummaged and found a can of peaches on the top shelf.

"Hiram," said Short. "That ain't polite. Them folks might be saving them peaches for company. The preacher, or somebody."

"Well, ain't we company?" grinned High, as he opened the can. "You say they's no limit to the hospitality of these wide places, so here goes."

"Hiram," said Short, as he rolled a

smoke, "this here is one of the foundations of American progress. In fact, it is a cornerstone. The humble home of a pioneer ranchman, where the latchstring hangs on the outside. A cottage that will some day grow into a mansion, with cattle on a thousand hills about it, and—"

"Shore," said High. "Speakin' of latchstrings and the like, I'm goin' to shut that door. A bat or something might come in here, and put the light out. I always was afraid in the dark."

"Hiram, you are always looking for boogers, and—"

"I'm lookin' for 'em now," said High. "I seen one today, and I done found out that accidents can happen in these wide places, same as anywhere else." He glanced at their carbines which he had stood in a corner, and Short went on talking about the pastoral life of a pioneer ranchman, until High stopped him with:

"Give them pioneers a rest, and tell me what you know about this Z Bar Z place that we are heading for. Is it a place like this, do you reck'n?"

"No, Hiram. It's a big, natural cow ranch. I've heard that Old Man Zack Zanner is so rough he's got thorns on him like an ocotillo bush, but he's square as a die."

"Shore. I've knowed men that was so square they dang nigh a dimunt, when they could have their own way. How far do you figger it is from here to that Z Bar Z?"

"Best I can make out from the way-bill, we ought to make it by tomorrow night, if we get an early start."

"We are apt to get an early start, all right," grinned High, "if them pioneers come in here. If you are sleepy, fall over on that bed, and grab some shut-eye. I aim to wait up, let the folks in, and apologize before the shooting starts—if they come."

"Hiram," said Short, in a low, pathetic tone, "I can't desecrate that bed with my profane body. I been scratchin' ever since we stays in that lousy bunkhouse the other night, and I wouldn't wonder if—"

"I never seen you when you wasn't scratchin' some," sneered High. "Get on that bed, you dang fool, and— Never mind. I hear the United States Army coming up the trail." High caught up Short's carbine and handed it to him saying: "Hang on to that gun. You might go off and leave it." Then picking up his own carbine, he fanned the light out with his hat.

"Why, Hiram," said Short. "Is that polite? Come into the gent's house, eat up everything on the place, and then not leave a light of welcome gleaming in the window when he comes home. Why—"

"Shut up, you dang granddaddy spider. You better get yo' legs untangled, and get ready to go some place. We don't need no light to get out that back door, if they come in the front, and if they want a light they can strike a match. They—Listen!"

"Hello in there!" came a roaring voice. They knew that voice. They had heard Mr. Melvin Rice roar once before, that day. "Hello, I say. You can't play possum on me. I know you are in there, Kinch Watters, and that ain't all I know. You been packing tales to rangers, about the Mel Rice Gang. Come on out. We don't aim to do nothin' but kill you. We seen you sneak in here a little before night, after being away a coupla days. You've packed yo' last tale to them rangers."

"Hiram," whispered Short, "that gent can make more bad mistakes than any man I ever seen. Don't you reck'n we better tell him the truth about this mess, so he won't skeer us plumb to death?"

"Shut up, you bullet-headed error on the blackboard of life. If that Mel Rice finds out who we are now, them peaches I et will be plumb wasted. Keep still, and let 'em show their hand."

"But, Hiram, they are apt to come in

here, and I don't believe I could stand it, skeered like I am."

"No, I reck'n not," jeered High, "and I doubt like hell if all of them stands it. Get over here by the side of the door. Punch a hole in the palissades. If they start to come in, we'll protect this humble cotter's home, as long as our cartridges lasts."

"Kinch Watters," called the bandit chief, "I'm telling you the last time to come out of yo' den. We don't want nothin' but you. Come on out, and we'll kill you and go on. If you want us to come in, and do the job in the presence of yo' wife and baby, we can do it. Are you comin' out, or are we comin' in?"

There was no whisper of sound from the little old shack. Mel Rice gave a low order to his men.

"Aw, hell, Mel," said one of the men, "they ain't nobody in that shack. If they was a woman in there, she'd be screechin' her head off."

"That's all you know about it," snapped Mel. "These ranch women ain't the screechin' kind. They are more apt to do their cryin' with lead tears. It won't take long to find out if they's anybody in there. They can't get out. We got the shack plumb surrounded. In with you."

"That gent may be a liar, sometimes," whispered High, "but he told the truth once. They are goin' to find out if anybody is in here."

"Yes, Hi-Hiram," faltered Short, "bu-but they done skeered me so bad I couldn't run, if I was out in the open. I—"

"Shut up, and get set. Here they come."

A dozen men were advancing on the house. They were within thirty feet of the door, when the walls of that shack blazed, smoked, and kept on smoking. Six of the men got back to the main body in front of the house. The other six were scattered along the route, mostly dead.

"Hey! What the hell's the matter?" demanded Mel Rice, who still sat his horse.

"I have to report that there is somebody in that shack," jeered one of Mel's men.

"Yes, damn 'em," snarled Mel Rice, "and they don't have to come out to be got. I offered fair, because I didn't want to kill the woman and baby, but Kinch Watters wouldn't take it. That woman was helpin' Kinch sling lead, and I wouldn't wonder if the baby fired a few shots, the way it was smokin'. I been in that shack. It ain't nothin' but open palissades, dobbed with dobe mud. Shoot the damn thing apart."

"Hiram," said Short, "our last hour is struck, hope is fled, and hell's broke loose. Them gents could miss us better out doors than they can in here. A rock as big as a biscuit would look like a shelter in the time of storm, to me."

"Shut up, you dang fool," snarled High. "Get down on the floor, and make a hole to shoot through. We'll— Never mind makin' a hole. They are makin' 'em." A gun had roared, and the bullet had knocked about half a bushel of dobe dirt into High's face. The partners lay down on the dirt floor of the shack, close against the wall. Earth had been banked up a foot or more along the outside of the wall, to keep water from running into the house when it rained. That bank was all the protection they had, and they were almost buried with dirt, as the bandits shot the dried mud from the cracks.

The firing stopped, at last. That side of the little shack was a ruin. All the mud was shot out of the cracks, and the cold starlight peered in at the wide cracks, to investigate the plight of the defenders of the castle.

"I guess that got 'em," bellowed Mel

Rice. "Didn't no lead come this way, that time. Hey, you fellows at the back. Did they come out that way?"

"Shore didn't," replied a voice from the rear of the house.

"Well, just keep yo' seats back there. We got 'em all right, but I aim to burn the nest. I want to show these squatters what happens to an outfit that packs tales to the rangers. Get some of that hay, out there, boys, and we'll start a blaze to leave by."

Old Short came up out of his blanket of dirt like a mad sow out of shuck-pile. He shook the sand out of his ears, crouched on his knees, and poked his carbine through a crack.

"What are you goin' to do?" whispered High.

"I aim to show them gents that they lied about gettin' us, and that the tribe I comes from don't fight much until they are skeered. Get yo' gun up from there, and act like yo' old grandpappy did, when them revenuers misunderstood him that time."

Two shots roared from the skeleton walls of the shack, and two men went from their saddles, almost a hundred yards away. The guns went on. Other men went down, while the main gang gave back out of range.

"Come on," snapped High, as he sprang across the room, and into the kitchen, just as guns began bombarding the front of the house again. "Them gents out back may be closer to the house."

They gained the back wall of the kitchen, and punched some holes in it. That back wall began to smoke. Two men went from their saddles, and the rest scampered to one side, while one of them yelled loud enough to be heard above the firing:

"Hey, Mel, muzzle them guns up. The bullets is going on through. You done kilt two of the boys, and—" The gentleman stopped, suddenly, for cause. High was getting a little bit peeved. He had punched a hole in that end of the kitchen, and killed the gentleman, before he could finish his remark. He didn't stop at that, but shelled that whole side of the house, while Short was doing the same little chore at the other end of the kitchen.

"What the hell's in that cabin, any way?" demanded Mel Rice.

"It's a whole company of rangers, with the devil to leg for 'em, if you ask me," replied one of the bandits.

"No it ain't," snapped Rice. "It's that fightin' fool Kinch Watters, and his heathen wife. It won't get 'em anything. I come to take 'em, and I aim to do it. Bunch on this side, and shoot it out. Then we'll work on around. We can see 'em if they come out. Here you go."

The cabin fronted south. They had shot all the mud out of that side the first thing. They now moved around to the east end of the house, and opened on it.

"Hiram," said Short, as they crouched on the floor of the kitchen, "this is the first time I ever wished I was a prairie-dog. If I was one, I'd be a mile deep in the dirt floor, inside a minute."

"If you don't watch out, you'll be six foot deep, with somebody throwin' dirt in yo' face with a spade," growled High, who was pulling at something in the corner of the kitchen, with his fingers.

What he was pulling at looked like a square of loose boards that had been put there to set the meal barrel on. High had rolled the barrel off the boards, and meant to set them up against the wall, to help turn the shower of bullets that was coming from that side. The boards finally came up, all in one piece, and High gasped: "Come here, Short."

Old Short wormed his way toward High, keeping exceedingly low in the wreckage of fallen dirt. He didn't find High's body, but he did butt into the little puncher's head.

"Where the devil is the rest of you?"

demanded Short. "Did them killers shoot yo' head off?"

"No," chuckled High. "I'm in a hole in the ground. They may be some sidewinders and vinegaroons in here, but they's worse than that outside. Fold up and fall in."

That hole in the ground was about four feet square, and a little more than that deep. It was covered with logs, and the clay of the kitchen floor pounded down on top of them. It was nothing but a place where Kinch Watters put his valuables when he and his wife were away from the little ranch on some visit. No one would ever suspect it was there, for the boards appeared to be only to keep the meal barrel off the ground. The barrel had been shot to splinters and High never would have found what it was, except that he was making a desperate effort to get behind something.

Crouched in that hole, the partners listened to the storm of shots, as Mel Rice and his men worked around the cabin, and shot it to ruins. At last, it stood, a gaunt skeleton of a house, with a roof on it.

"I'll bet you four bits them gent's is makin' a mistake," chuckled High, as the firing slowed up. "If they ain't got a amunition supply train, they are goin' to—Listen!"

"Well, what did you stop for?" roared Mel Rice.

"Out of lead, Mel," came a chorus of voices.

"Hell you are," snorted Rice. "Well, we quieted 'em. Get that hay, now, and let's finish the job. Then we'll go where we can get plenty more cartridges."

"Some of them gents is goin' where cartridges would go off, if they had 'em," chuckled High, as he crawled out of that hole.

"Gosh, I'm glad to get out of there," sighed Short, as he scrambled out onto the cluttered floor. "Both my laigs is asleep."

"Well, don't make any noise," snapped High. "Let them gents come up close. We ain't got any too much lead left."

One of Rice's men rode up to him and said: "Hey, Mel. What's the use in burnin' that shack. They ain't nobody in there alive, now. They ain't a inch of the inside of that *jacal* that ain't been hit by a bullet."

"I know that," snarled Mel Rice, "but I aim to show these ranchers what happens when they pack tales to the rangers about Mel Rice. They's a lot of bigger outfits than this that's going to get the same dose. Bring that hay, and set fire to the shack."

Mr. Rice was making a serious, but quite natural mistake. No one would have supposed that any person could remain alive in that shredded old cabin. High and Short stood in the dirt strewn floor, listening. In the shadow of the room, they could not be seen, but there were ample openings through which they could see what was going on outside. Two men, with armfuls of hay came on toward the house. Rice and the rest of his men sat their horses at a little distance to see the work well done.

"Let the gents with the hay alone," whispered High. "We can get them later. Take the ones that's on the horses. You shoot to the right, and I'll shoot to the left. Let's go."

The walls of that dead house blazed and smoked again. At the first two shots, two men went from their horses. The two men dropped their hay, and scampered for their mounts. Then the whole gang whirled and galloped away from the place. They were out of ammunition, and a gunfight would be too one-sided for them. Any way, they thought that cabin was possessed of the devil. The two men with the hay never reached their mounts.

"Come on, Hiram," called Short, as he sprang out the battered door. "Let's get our braunks, and take them gents apart."

"Shut up," snapped High. "The Lord looks after fools and drunk men, but He's

apt to get tired of messin' with one fool too long. We are going to get our braunks, and head for that Z Bar Z place. If anybody finds out we done this, we are apt to get arrested for exceeding the bag limit, or something."

"Hiram," said Short, as they stole down the draw to their horses, "I'm glad them gents decided not to burn that shack. It's the damndest mess I ever saw. We might tell what bullets done to it and nobody would believe it, unless we had the house to show. This waybill says it's a straight dry run from here to the Z Bar Z, with never a draw, or a drop of water."

"All right," snapped High. "Lead out."

They had ridden in silence for some time, and it was past midnight. The trail was quite plain, and they followed it without difficulty in spite of the fact that the night was cloudy, and no stars were to be seen. At last, Short pulled up. High rode up by the side of him, and the gaunt old drifter said:

"Hiram, the trail forks here, and I don't know which hand to take. My waybill don't say nothin' about a forked trail. The right hand may lead to the Z Bar Z, and agin it may lead across the divide to the Pecos. The left hand may lead to the Z Bar Z, and again it may lead to the river."

"In other words, you are plumb lost," snapped High. "We don't know straight up, because we can't see no stars to go to."

"That's about right, Hiram. All we can do is trust to luck, and my superior intelligence. This left hand goes straight ahead, and the right hand forks off to the right. That tells me that straight ahead goes to the Z Bar Z, and the fork goes to the Pecos."

"All right," said High, sleepily, "hit the trail straight ahead. If it don't take us to the Z Bar Z, I got a hunch that we won't miss much, just judging by what we have saw of this open space country."

Short took the lead again, and they jogged on into the wall of darkness. What lay ahead of them, they could only guess, and their guesses were likely to be wrong.

THE DEVIL'S TRACKS

Captain Rufus Ridley was one hard-boiled old ranger, and he had a company of hard-boiled rangers. It was said that he had men in his company that could trail a sidewinder across a lava bed. Captain Ridley was probably the gentleman who started the story that, "The rangers always get their man—provided he has not already been got." At any rate, the Captain and his merry men were out to get Mel Rice and his gang. They rode into San Miguel ten hours after Mel Rice and a dozen of his killers had left that lovely little border city. They got the information from Big Mike, who had also told Mel Rice that rangers were after him. Big Mike was playing both ends against the middle, and selling liquor to all comers.

The rangers had followed Mel's trail without difficulty. They had found tracks where there had been some sort of activity in the head of a deep draw. In the draw they had found two dead men whom they were unable to identify, and had no time to bury. It was almost sunset, but the rangers picked up the trail, farther down the draw, overlooking the trail of two riders who had gone toward Kinch Watters' little ranch cabin. The trail that they followed led toward the Rio Grande, at an angle. They spurred on, determined to overtake the bandits before they could cross to the other side of that border stream.

At nightfall, the rangers pulled up in the edge of a section of roughs. The band of fleeing men had scattered as they went into those roughs, and it was impossible to follow them. The Captain called a halt, and said:

"Well, boys, we can't follow 'em any

farther tonight, but we'll strike their trail again tomorrow. There's not enough room on this side of the Rio Grande for them and us, and they'll have to cross, or be got. I have had word that the *rurales* are hot after 'em on the other side, so they won't cross unless they have to."

"Captain," said a wrinkled old sergeant, who looked as if he might have been on the trail since the days of Sam Houston, "there ain't no place in here to make camp. No water, and no grass for our horses."

"I know it," snapped the Captain. "I meant to spend the night at Kinch Watters' cabin, until we got off on this trail. Our horses are wore out now, and it's about forty mile to Kinch's cabin, but I reck'n all we can do is go there. Head out, Sergeant. You know the country. Keep a look out that we don't run into a trap of Mel Rice and his killers."

So, those weary rangers, on weary horses, plodded on through the night, for the nearest water that they knew of, at the Watters cabin. It was just sunrise when the Captain and his sergeant, who were in the lead, pulled up at that ruined cabin.

"What the hell has been going on here?" swore the Captain.

"Looks sorty like they had been a fight," declared the Old Sergeant.

"Sorter like it?" snapped Captain Ridley. "It looks a damn sight like it. Hell's Bells and a Nigger Boy! Kinch and his woman must have put up a real fight. Look at 'em. Scattered all over the place. Let's go in and see can we find what's left of Kinch and his woman. Damned shame for fighters like them to be killed, but I reck'n the Rice Gang got 'em."

They went into that skeleton cabin, and looked all over it. The boards were back over the hole in the corner of the kitchen, and the splintered remains of the barrel in place. At last they gave up the search, and Captain Ridley said:

"Damnedest mess I ever saw. A chigger couldn't been in that house and not get hit. Don't see a drop of blood in the house. Them devils must have taken Kinch and his woman and baby whole."

"I don't know about that, Cap'n," said the Sergeant, "but I know horses and men can't go always without grub and water."

"I know that as well as you do," snapped the Captain, "but if you see any grub about this place that is not mixed with dobe dirt, jump in and eat it. Water the horses at the windmill. The men will have to chew their thumbs until we get grub. There were plenty of those killers left to make a trail. Pick it up, and we'll ride until the horses drop in their tracks."

"This Country Ain't Right Healthy!"

So, the rangers picked up the trail of Mel Rice and his men, again overlooking two riders who had gone in another direction. The trail led southwest, toward the river. Mel Rice said they would go where they could get cartridges, but the ranger captain didn't know that. If he had, he would have headed straight for *Los Lobos*, a wild old river town, rightly named "The Wolves." Instead, the rangers followed the trail, which they finally lost in the roughs again, in spite of the skill of their trailers.

High and Short had ridden on far into the night, which had become dark and murky. Their horses followed the trail, but they could see nothing of the country, and had no idea of the direction that they were taking. It was well on toward morning when they rode down a steep hill, and their horses splashed into water.

"Hold the deal, Short!" called High, as his horse stopped and buried its nose in the shallow water. "You're lost. This ain't no dry trail. We are either on the

Pecos or the Rio Grande. Them's all the water they are in this country."

"Wrong again, as usual," said Short. "We just been makin' better time than we thought we was. The Z Bar Z is on the head of Wolf Creek, and this is it. We are pretty close to the ranch."

"Oh, we are? Well, I don't want to go bustin' into no strange place in the night time. Let's tie up and sleep until morning. I just about fell off'n my braunk three-four times."

Five minutes later the two drifters were asleep, a little way from the trail, while their old sunfishers cropped the grass and bushes that they could reach. It was after sunrise when High and Short woke. High sat up on the ground and looked about him, as he rolled a smoke, and then:

"Short, you crazy he road-runner. This ain't the head of no creek. It ain't half a mile from here to the Rio Grande, and the mouth of this little branch."

"Well, what of it," growled Short. "We got water, ain't we? This is Wolf Creek. All we got to do is follow up it until we finds the Z Bar Z."

"Yeah, and all you have to do is follow up the Mississippi to the head, and you'll dang nigh be in Canada. I don't need no water. What I need is grub. I could eat a horse and saddle, right now. Come on. Let's saddle and ride, before we starve to death—or get killed."

They mounted and took the plain trail that led on up the river. They had gone about a mile, when High checked his mount and said:

"Oh-oh. Here's where we meet Old Man Diss Aster and his brothers, Too Bad and Ain't It a Shame. Look at them, gents, Short."

Short was already looking at them. Three riders were coming on to meet the two drifters, and High had named them right, for there were not three harder-looking villains on the border.

"Hi'yer, gents," greeted Short, as they pulled up. "Do this trail lead to the Z Bar Z?"

"No, it don't," snarled one of the three men. "Do you two fellers belong to that outfit?"

"We shore don't, pardner," High broke in, after noting the tone of the question. "We are heading for El Paso, and it looks like we got out'n the trail some place."

" 'Pends on where you come from," growled the renegade. "This trail leads into Los Lobos, about a mile from here. Then, they's a trail that leads from Los Lobos right on up the river to El Paso. You gents better ride it as soon as you can. This country ain't right healthy in here."

"How come?" asked High, innocently. "Has tick fever broke out among the cows, blind-staggers among the horse stock, or something?"

"No," snarled the stranger. "Lead poison is apt to break out among the men, and strangers ain't welcome in here, lessn'n a feller knows which side he's on."

"Oh, thataway. Well, it being like that, and all, we'll try to make it to El Paso today."

"You'll have a damn long ride, if you do," grinned one of the other men, "but you can ride some off'n this end of the trail. So long, gents."

The three spurred on toward the creek, and High and Short spurred on toward Los Lobos.

"Short," said High, "do you recollect hearing Mel Rice say last night that they was going where they could get plenty cartridges?"

"Shore I do. What of it?"

"Well, I reck'n you seen that them gents all had more guns on 'em than they are on a battleship. I reck'n, also, *tambien*, too, that you seen them grain bags on they saddle horns, each one with about half a bushel in it."

"Yes, I seen all of that, but what of it?" growled Short.

"The stuff in them bags had square corners. Them three gents was packing Mel Rice and his killers a lot of ingredients for Bullet Pie and Smoke Stuffing. They had enough cartridges in them bags to run the United States army for a month, and I wouldn't wonder Mel aims to use 'em, on somebody."

"Hiram, if you could guess as good before a thing happens as you can afterwards, you'd be a valuable man."

"Yeah. If I could do that, I never would been damn fool enough to let you lead me into these wide places, where man-eating taggurs roam the range, and they's a sidewinder under every rock that ain't got two. Spur up, and let's see can we get something to eat in this Los Lobos town. I'll bet that name's a lie. They's bob cats and lorns in a place like that."

"Now, see here, Hiram," said Short, as they came in sight of the little group of squat dobe houses that made up the city of Los Lobos, "you better let me do most of the talking in that town. You ain't got as much sense as a one-eyed weasel, and you'll get us into a jam if you go to asking too many questions.

"All right," snapped High. "All I want to say is 'Gimme some ham and eggs and coffee,' and then, 'Gimme some ham and eggs and coffee,' two-three more times."

They eased into the town and stopped in front of the one big store in the place. They dismounted and entered the place, which was a dobe building, none too well lighted. The man behind the counter was a furtive-eyed American.

"We want some cartridges," said Short.

"Sorry, sir," said the merchant, "but we are all out of forty-fives and thirty-eights. All we have is forty-fours."

"That's too bad," mourned Short.

"Yes," said the salesman, "but we'll have in another shipment in a few days. All we have now is forty-fours."

"I see you got plenty of them," grinned High, who was looking at the stack of cartridge-boxes on the base-shelf back of the counter. "Give us a couple hundred of them forty-fours, and we'll trim 'em to fit."

"Why, I—I never heard of that being done," declared the merchant, as he shoved four boxes of forty-fours across the counter.

"Well," drawled Short, as he and High broke the boxes and proceeded to fill every loop in their belts, "it would be uncommon, but these carbines of ours, and also our six-shooters, is forty-fours."

The merchant looked at them in a puzzled manner, until they had stowed away those two hundred messengers of death. He was still staring at the two drifters, when High said:

"Pardner, is they a place in this town where a gent could get something to eat?"

"Certainly," said the merchant. "The hotel is right next door."

As the partners reached the street, Old Short growled:

"Hiram, son, that gent had orders not to sell any cartridges to strangers. You was looking straight at them forty-fours, and all he could do was lie out of the forty-fives and thirty-eights. Mostly, gents packs forty-five six-guns, and thirty-eight carbines."

"Shore," grinned High, "but we can't be bothered about his mistakes. We got some smoke-makers, and now what I want is grub."

"Hiram, we ain't got as much business in this place as a possum's got in a bear-fight. We better ride, and—"

"I don't ride nowhere, until I eat," snapped High. "Come on, let's give 'em a chance to poison us."

They entered what appeared to be an ordinary border restaurant, with its smell of garlic and scorched grease. It was all of that, and more. Much more. The place was a typical *posada* of the borderland. One could eat, drink, sleep, play

any gambling game he wished, in that *posada,* and—incidentally, he could get killed and spirited away. They were met just inside the door by a handsome gentleman, in full Mexican regalia, who flashed two rows of wonderful white teeth, as he greeted them profusely in Spanish.

"Misdeal, pardner," growled Short. "I gets too many aces in that one."

"*Que es eso, Senor?*" smiled the Mexican. "What is that? You do not speak Spanish?"

"No," growled Short. "I'm human. We want some grub. Ham, eggs and coffee for two."

The man broke out in Spanish again, as he watched the faces of the two men, to see if they understood. They stared at him like a day-old calf looking at a branding fire. The Mexican decided that they didn't understand, and bowed them grandiloquently to a little table. He then called the order to a waiter, and walking about ten feet away from the table he stopped to talk to a hard-visaged Mexican, who wore a sash, with the handle of a throwing-knife protruding from it. The handsome gentleman talked rapidly, in a low tone, but his words carried to that table. He was saying, in Spanish:

"They must not go out of here. I have orders from El Capitan Rice that no stranger who comes to Los Lobos shall leave before he returns here."

"The same to you and your family, damn you," grunted High.

They went on eating, as if they had not understood a word the handsome gentleman had said, though either of them could give him a hundred-yard lead, and beat him a mile at speaking his own language. When they had finished they pooled their resources and paid the check, which was plenty big.

As High and Short started for the door, that handsome gentleman got in front of them, and told them what a wonderful place the *patio* was, to smoke. He assured them that if they wished to rest, the rooms were perfect; if they wished to drink, the bar service was matchless; if they wished to gamble, they could play any game that they might desire, without going out of the *posada.* If they wished their horses cared for, it should be done, without troubling them.

Old Short was thinking that Mexican must have read about the obliging manner of the master of the Whitehorse Inn, but High, who had never heard of the adventures of Mr. Pickwick, was thinking something else, and he showed it by saying:

"See here, *hombre,* you talk too damn much with your mouth. I heard what you said a while ago, about nobody leaving here until tomorrow. This joint is in Texas, and a Texan goes where he damn pleases, when he gets good and ready. We are going out of here. Get out of the way, you lousy *ladrone,* before I fold you up, and stuff you in yo' own pocket."

"The gentleman jests," smiled he of the white teeth, while he nodded his head at the man with the throwing-knife in his belt. That was as far as he got. High's gun flashed out and up. When it came down, it connected with that handsome head, and night came at once for the smiling greeter of that old *posada.*

The other man went for his knife. Short saw him, and raised him. Short's gun flashed out and roared once. That artist would throw no more knives. Behind the bar, a fat Mexican yelled:

"Help! Call the *jefe.*"

"Shut up," snapped High. "You better tell Old Man Jeffy to keep away from this joint, until the smoke settles. Get down behind that bar, so I can't kill you."

The fat man dropped behind the bar, as if he had already been shot. High and Short started for the door, then stopped. There was the sound of running feet outside, and the next moment that door was filled with the most villainous bouquet of

faces that the two drifters had ever seen. High glanced back over his shoulder, and saw a narrow passage that led from the restaurant and bar back to the *patio*.

That passage was open at both ends. A gun cracked, at the door, and the bullet fanned Short's face. The next second, a stream of that newly acquired lead was pouring out that door. Men went down, while others sprang to safety outside. High and Short were backing toward that passage as they fired. They gained it, and stopped midway the short, narrow corridor, one facing each way. The bar and restaurant were very quiet, but there was wild yelling out in the street. The burden of the cry was:

"El Diablo! Muerte por el gringoes, los Rangers." The Devil! Death to the gringoes, the rangers.

"Hiram, son," drawled Short," we are goin' to have to prove we ain't rangers, or we never will get out of this country."

"We ain't apt to get out of it no way," snapped High. "We been runnin' our braunks ragged to get away from Mel Rice and his boys, and we have came right into their nest."

"It looks like it, Hiram, but—Watch out!"

A knife had been thrown into the passage, and had chipped the wall within inches of High's head. It had come from the *patio* end of the passage. High skipped along that passage with his gun in his hand. A man was making a desperate effort to reach a door at one side of the *patio*. High's gun roared, and—the man didn't make it. High ran back to Short, just as another attack was started at the front door. It was lead, this time. The killers were standing back from the door, and pouring a stream of bullets obliquely into that passage to block their escaping.

"Hiram, son," drawled Short, "it is right warm in this passage. Maybe we better get out in the fresh air, before we faint some."

They backed into the *patio*, kicked open a door, and entered a small room. It was somebody's bedroom, but the gentleman was not in, fortunately for him.

"Hiram," said Short, "I don't like this room."

"Oh, Señor," chuckled High. "Eef you are not pliz to keep this room, I will send a maid, to change you to another, and—"

"Shut up, you dang fool," snarled Short. "We have run into a trap, like a couple of skeered weasels. We ain't got no chance to get out of here. I don't mind a little gunwork in the open, but this is something else. Them gents will just keep us here until Mel and his nice boys gets back, and then—"

"Well, here comes some of 'em, now. Get set."

They had closed the door to a crack. Peering through the crack, they saw about twenty men come storming into the *patio*, chattering like a bunch of apes.

"The more we get, the more we've got," whispered High. "The only way we'll ever get out of here is to shoot our way out. Let's go. You can't miss."

The two drifters had their pistols and their carbines. Before the hunters could locate them, that door was smoking, and men were toppling over in the *patio*. In half a minute, the place was cleared of men. High and Short had jerked the door open, and dropped a killer apiece, as the last ones reached a door at the other side of the little court.

"Hiram," said Short, "this can't go on forever."

"Not unless they's right smart men in this town that wants to be kilt," grinned High.

"Yes, you blamed idjit. You think we can keep this up, but we can't. I've played poker enough to know that luck don't run that way. One hand, you draw four aces and a king. Next hand, you are apt to draw a bobtailed flush, with everything but yo' shirt on the table. It's about time for us to do that."

Silence was over the old *posada*. High stuck his head out the door and listened intently. He saw nothing, heard nothing. After a moment, Short called:

"Come here, Hiram. Listen. Is that rats gnawing the wall?"

"Rats, hell," grinned High, after listening a moment. "A rat would have him a dentist's bill, if he tried to eat that stuff. That's a auger turning in the wall. Come on. We got to go from here."

They sprang out into the *patio* and sped on across it. No shot was fired, and they gained the room on the other side. There was no one in that room. Short slammed the door, and dropped the bar.

"All we done was trade one trap for another one," growled Short. "What I want is running room. I'm skeered."

"Well," grinned High, "the whole outdoors is callin' you, if you think you can eat lead pie, hop to it. I aim to stay here until—" High didn't finish his remark.

Crash! Boom! The two drifters fell to the floor as if lightning had struck them, while chunks of the dobe walls fell all over them, and dust filled their eyes.

SOME MORE OF THE DEVIL'S TRACKS

"Hiram," groaned Short, "I reck'n we are dead, but I never knowed it was this dusty in hell. That gent that fell agin the door must of had a awful jag on him."

"Shut up, you owl-eyed ape," snapped High. "Them fools sticks a lot of dynamite in that hole they was boring, and sets it off. They didn't have sense enough to know what it would do."

"Hiram," sighed Short, as he rubbed the dust out of his big gray eyes," I shore hate to leave a nice town like this, but if I could get to my braunk, I could be led away from here, like a lamb is led to the shearing pen."

"Yeah," muttered High, as he pounded at a little window at the back of the room with a chunk of dobe. "You wanted to find the wide places. Well, I got to tell you that this one ain't wide enough for a man my size, and I'm goin' away from here. You can stay, if you like it."

The window went out, and so did High, with Old Short right behind him. They ran to the corner of the building, peered around, and saw their two old sunfishers, standing in front of the big store. There was wild yelling in the house, as the crowd of killers sought the bodies of what they thought were two ranger scouts. The partners took a deep breath, and sprinted for their horses. They were in their saddles, and headed out of town before any one saw them. A few shots were fired at them, but the bullets went wide of the mark. They had torn along the trail for a mile, when they came to where it forked, one of them turning sharp to the right, up the Wolf Creek valley, and the other going straight on up the river.

"Hold on, Hiram," said Short, as they pulled up. "That right hand trail must lead to the Z Bar Z, and that's where we are goin'."

"Yeah?" grinned High. "You may be goin' there, but not me. I got enough skeer seed in my pockets right now to plant a hedge from here to the Pacific Ocean, and I'm heading West, where they don't do nothin' worse than kill people."

"Hiram, don't be a dang fool—I mean no bigger one than you naturally are. We can get a good, steady job at the Z Bar Z, and—"

"Maybe we could, if we could get there," snapped High, "but we can't get there. We been tryin' for a week, and every time we heads that way, something happens."

"Why, Hiram, them was just some little accidents, that's apt to happen to anybody."

"Accidents, hell," jeered High. "Every damn one of them gents was tryin' to kill us, a purpose."

"Aw, hell, Hiram," growled Short. "They ain't no work for cowhands to do out West, except in the mountain country, and you wouldn't like that. The cowhands all has to pack ladders, so they can climb up and chuck the cows out'n holes in the bluffs. I been out there, and I know."

"Well," relented High, "if it's that way out there, I don't care what happens to me. If they could do anything to a man for follerin' a damn fool into trouble, I'd done been hung a hundred times. Lead out for that Z Bar Z, but I'm tellin' you right now that the next time anybody jumps me in these wide open places, I'm apt to get mad, and go to slingin' lead."

The partners jogged on up the worn trail. They had asked no one how far it was to the Z Bar Z, and had no idea that it was more than twenty miles from Los Lobos. It had been almost noon when they finally got all their business transacted, and got out of the old border town. Mid-afternoon, the trail crowded into the narrow gorge where the little stream came down from the higher country. They stopped at the creek and watered their horses.

"Beautiful, purling stream," said Short, musingly. "We are on Old Man Zack's range, now. I seen a big Z Bar Z steer a little ways back. Wonderful cow country. No wonder Old Man Zack grabs it, sets up his markers, and tells all and sundry to lay off'n it."

"Did you hear Old Man Zack say that?" asked High.

"No, I—I didn't hear him say it, but I heared that he did say it, and make it stick."

"Well, all I got to say is this here: hearsay ain't worth a damn in court. Seein' is believin', and I want to see some grub, and get a little sleep, before my eyes grows plumb up. Lead on out of this hole, to where we can see something."

The trail climbed to the highlands by long, deep benches. The two drifters would climb a steep, and come out on one of those benches where the ground was level for a quarter of a mile, with fine grass growing. Short would comment on what wonderful cow country it was, but High kept silent. He was skeptical of everything in those wide places. They came at last to a place where the trail ran through a pass between two considerable hills. The pass was fifty yards, or more, wide, and two hundred yards long. Bluffs had been formed by erosion, on each side of the pass, and big rocks were strewn along the foot of the bluffs, many of them half as large as a house. It was a wild looking place. Half way through the pass, the two drifters heard horses coming on to meet them. They looked up, and saw about a hundred horses galloping along the trail. Short jerked his mount around, and rode in among the rocks to one side, to let the band of horses pass. As the leader galloped by, he said:

"Hiram, son, we are shore in luck. That's the Z Bar Z remuda. The spread is out on a drive, and all we got to do is join it, and go to work. They say Old Man Zack always needs hands, and—"

"I ain't ever saw a remuda in such a hell of hurry as them braunks is in," said High. "Looks like they's a booger after 'em."

"Oh, the boys is just starting the drive, and the braunks all feels kittenish. not being rode much. Here comes the hands, but I don't see no chuck wagon."

There was an excellent reason for Short not seeing a chuck wagon. That reason was that there was none. The men who galloped into that pass were shaggy looking fellows, with guns all over them. In the vanguard were the three men that High and Short had met that morning, as they rode toward Los Lobos.

"Oh-oh," High said. "There's them Aster boys again, and it looks like they brings along the whole family. I don't want to argue with them gents. Let's get behind something."

That strange remuda and the men with it stormed on down the trail, as High and Short sat their horses behind the boulders, without being seen. Mr. Rice and his men were too busy trying to get away with the stolen horses, to notice them.

Captain Rufus Ridley and his men had left the Watters cabin just after sunrise that morning, following what he swore was the Devil's Tracks. The trail had led a little west of south for a good while. Then it had suddenly turned into the Wolf Creek brakes, and try how they would, the Captain's expert trailers could never find it again.

"Damned if it don't look like they can rise and fly, Sergeant," the Captain said.

"Shore does, Cap'n. They got some Injun tricks. I recollect one time we was trailin' Old Victorio in this same section, and the old devil does the same thing. His trail would be plumb plain for ten or twenty mile, and all of a sudden it would just plumb evaporate."

"I don't know anything about what Victorio could do," snapped the Captain. "That was before my time. I do know that nothing but the devil could make the tracks we saw at the Watters cabin, cut as plain a trail away from there as they did, and then just sink into the ground in good trailing country. They—"

"Why, Cap'n, I seen that before. Them devils all packs a set of shoes made out'n rawhide with the hair on. When they want their trail lost, they just dismounts, puts them fancy skates on their braunks, and rides on. You can trail 'em easy on loose ground, but a one-eyed gander couldn't see the trail on rocks. They just—"

"Oh, damn it," snarled the Captain, "I've heard my granddaddy tell that one, and—"

"Shore you have, and it worked, too. That's just what Mel Rice and his killers has done. They—"

"Oh, shut up. Get the boys all in off that fool hunt for the trail. We'll go on to Wolf Creek, and get some water, then start new."

Captain Ridley and his company of half-famished rangers struck Wolf Creek at the very point where High and Short had crossed that historical stream in the night before. When they got water, they were still half-starved, so they decided to move on to Los Lobos, for food. Several of the men knew the place, and the wrinkled old Sergeant knew it very well.

"Cap'n," said the Sergeant, "that town is named right. It is a wolf's nest, and the toughest town on the border."

"I don't give a damn how tough it is," snapped Captain Rufus Ridley. "My men have got to eat. We can't trail the devil half way to hell, without grub. Lead out."

The rangers rode into the lone, sandy street of the quietest town on the border, at that moment. They pulled up in front of the *posada*, and the Captain growled:

"*Sergeant*, this is the damnedest mess I ever saw in my life. What do you suppose has happened here? This is said to be Mel Rice's main hangout. He wouldn't tear it up like that."

"Ask that gent what happened," said the Sergeant, as the handsome greeter of the *posada*, with a bloody bandage on his aching head approached them.

"What the hell has happened here?" demanded the Captain.

"Yo no se, Señor," replied the greeter, showing his two rows of pearls in the best smile that he could muster.

"Cut out that damned jabbering, and talk human to me," roared Captain Ridley. "I'm a ranger captain, and I don't want any foolishness from you."

"Ah, Si Señor Capitan. Eet is like thees. *El Diablo* has been here, and—"

"He has, eh? I believe it. Them look like his tracks. What did he look like?"

"Why, when he was here he looka lak two ranger scouts, maybeso. I do not know how he look now."

"Get into that store boys," ordered the Captain. "Maybe you can find enough to keep you alive until we get to Zack Zanner's ranch."

Half an hour later the rangers came out of the store. They left a famine behind them, after eating everything that was human food, and much that was not. They were just mounting to start for the Z Bar Z, when that band of horses came storming into the street. Captain Ridley took one glance, and knew what he had found—nothing but a fight, and he went at it.

"Take 'em, boys," he yelled. "They have raided Zack Zanner's ranch. We don't need any prisoners."

What the devil had started in Los Lobos that day, the rangers finished. Mel Rice was among the first to fall. A few got away, but very few. Captain Ridley didn't wait to bury any dead. He had lost no men, for he had taken the Rice Gang by surprise, and ruined them.

"Round up them horses, and hit the trail for the Z Bar Z, like hell was after you," roared the Captain.

A few minutes later that band of horses was storming back up the trail. The rangers had forgotten that they were killing their mounts. Not a one of them but knew Old Man Zack, had stayed at his house, and eaten his beef and beans. All were in a frenzy to learn what had happened when that band of horses was taken.

Meantime, High and Short had jogged on toward the Z Bar Z. They reached the place about sunset, and pulled up.

"Nice, quiet place," grinned High.

It was quiet. The only sign of welcome was some wreaths of smoke that were rising from a heap of ashes where the house had been. The house, every haystack, and even the corral fences had been burned.

"Ah, Señor. The Devil Has Been Here!"

"Hiram, son," said Short, mournfully, "men like them ain't got no right to live and breathe, and have their being in Texas."

"They didn't all live," grinned High, as he pointed to a dozen dead men that lay scattered about.

"Them's ranch hands," said Short. "Some of 'em ain't even got guns on 'em."

"I reck'n they had 'em," opined High, "and them buzzards taken 'em off'n the bodies, before they rides away. Oh-oh. Here's where it happens. They forgets something, and are coming back after it, I reck'n."

"Hiram, son," mourned Short, "don't you reck'n we ought to go some place?"

"No," said High, wearily. "Our braunks couldn't get us half way there, if it weren't but six inches. Any way, them gents can reach us, with long-handled guns. All we can do is stand and take it. You been hunting wide places, and this is one of 'em. Looks like— Why, that ain't them fellers. It's—"

"Better let them do most of the talking,

Hiram," said Short. "We know more than we could tell in a year. I don't feel like talking, and you are too dang ignorant to talk intelligent."

"What the hell happened here?" demanded the Captain, as he rode up to them.

"Name it and take it, pardner," grinned High. "We are strangers in this section ourselfs."

"Hell you are! Who are you, anyway?"

"Just a coupla pore drifting cowhands," said High. "We started to the Z Bar Z a few weeks ago, but it was farther, the way we comes, than we thought it would be, so we just got here."

"Oh, you did? Which way did you come?"

"Why, we starts west from Del Rio. After we went four five hundred miles, and got out beyond San Miguel, some gents jumps us, and runs us into a hole in the ground. We was skeered right smart. Two or three of 'em gets hurt, tryin' to dig us out, so they went away, and we—"

"I see," said the captain. "We found that place. You hurt two of 'em pretty bad. They are still there. Go ahead."

"Well, we went on to a ranch cabin that night, but nobody was at home, and—"

"Thank God for that!" said the Captain. "I thought Kinch Watters and his wife and baby had been killed. Were you there when Mel Rice and his gang took the place apart?"

"Yes, sir. We couldn't get away until they left, and—"

"Well, I'll be damned," snorted the Captain. "Where did you go from there?"

"Why, we gets lost in the night, and next morning we comes to a nice little town called Los Lobos, and—"

"Wait a minute. Are you the two devils that took the town apart and oiled it?"

"We helped some," admitted High, modestly.

Just then, about twenty men came storming up to the ruined ranch from the opposite direction. They were led by a shaggy, bewhiskered old fellow, who yelled:

"Hi'yer Rufe. Got here a little too late, didn't you?"

"Shore did, Zack," said the Captain. "Was any of your folks hurt?"

"No. Kinch Watters and his woman comes here yesterday, and tells us that Mel Rice is on the prod again, so we taken all the women up to a ranch cabin I got back in the hills. I left about a dozen boys here to watch the place, but it looks like they didn't watch very good. I'll have to build it back. This is the third time it has been burnt out."

Captain Ridley and Zack led the cavalcade toward the ranch cabin, where he swore he would kill a couple of cows, and feed them. As they went along, the Captain told Zack about the two drifters, who had come to the Z Bar Z to get a job. Old Man Zack roared with laughter, and then said:

"Rufe, them's the kind of cowhands It takes for this country. I'll give 'em a job, as long as they'll stay."

But the decision had already been made. High and Short were riding together, when High said:

"Short, if you like the wide places, you can stay here. Me, I aim to get me some safe job, like packing fire through a powder factory, or the like. Soon as I get a good feed and some sleep, I aim to hunt the nearest ford on the *Pecos*, get east of it, and stay there the rest of my life, natural or unnatural."

"Hiram, I think I'll go with you. I like it out here, all right, and we could get a job with Old Man Zack, but— 'Bout the time we got settled, some gent would come along and burn up our bedding. Yes, Hiram, when you get ready to ride, I'll go along, to keep you from getting lost, strayed or stolen."

BUZZARD'S CACHE

By

JAMES P. OLSEN

A Six-Gun Reputation Often Brought A Man Some Surprises. To Cutter Frey The Surprise Came Through Powder Smoke

He rode into Vego, aired his saddle before the Cowboy's Rest and went inside. Having downed one drink and filled his glass again, Cutter Frey put his elbows on the bar, hooked one high heel over the brass rail and faced the room.

His grayish eyes turned here and there, conveying to this and that man at this and that table that he held them and their world in complete contempt. He stared at Staub Meance, noted the puckery scar on his face, and his tied-down gun. Drifted his appraisal to Meance's partner and table-mate, Milo Waunch. Waunch was almost an

They struck earlier than planned.

albino. He did not wear his pistol thonged down; but the half-breed holster was ready to his hand.

Cutter Frey yawned.

He turned sideways to the bar, inspecting the rear of the Cowboy's Rest, now and again sipping his drink and making grimaces of distaste that annoyed the pomaded, pink-faced bartender no end. He started to vent his annoyance verbally, then changed his mind. There are those who'll take it—and those who won't. Meance and Waunch were a pair of those who would not. The thin-lipped, aggravating stranger to Vego looked as if he might be another who would not.

The bartender noted, too, that the gray-eyed stranger's gun was worn low, and was well-kept. No cowhand's tool of all work, from driving staples to opening cans, was that shooting tool. Being a cautious man, the bartender appeased himself by wishing somebody else would take Cutter Frey down a peg or two.

And never, it became almost instantly apparent, was a wish to be more quickly granted.

Cutter Frey still had his broad back to the doors when those doors swung gently inward, admitted Sheriff Hassnan. Talk died as heads turned slowly, eyes tracing Hassnan's quiet, slow progress down the bar toward Cutter Frey. There rested within most of those heads the knowledge that Hassnan was hard, strict, just; a man who stuck closely to the letter of the law. This knowledge brought respect for the big, gray-haired sheriff. Only Meance and Waunch were looking with disrespect upon him.

That pair, sneering, evidently considered Hassnan a fool, a hay-shaker; yet the balefulness of their gaze indicated they were not too positive of this. They hated Hassnan. And sometimes hate is kin to interference—or fear.

Hassnan was an old-timer at the law game. He took no crazy, ostentatious, damned-fool chances with a man who was known as dangerous and was armed. That Cutter Frey was armed was, of course, nothing against him. Who, hereabouts, was not? That he was dangerous was obvious. Hassnan's actions attested that fact.

Horny old paw closed about the butt of his own weapon, the sheriff reached out and snatched Cutter Frey's lead-slinger from the leather. He dropped it on the floor and kicked it behind him as Frey spun around.

Frey was fast. His wheeling movement was explosive, bringing him face-to-face with Hassnan, knees bent, feet wide apart. He asked no questions, nor did he pause to give answers. His right hand speared under his double-breasted wool shirt. The buttons had been sewed over the buttonholes on that side—a well-known and always deceiving stingy-gunman's ruse.

Hassnan jabbed his own weapon forward stiffly, doubling Frey up as his stingy-gun came free. "Drop 'er, damn yuh!" Hassnan roared. "I'm the law!"

Cutter Frey opened his fist and his second gun joined the first one on the floor. He showed Hassnan his teeth. "I didn't get it you was a law," he snarled. "Don't go tryin' to pull no rusties that I resisted arrest. Not thet I care for law. I don't want to hurt you, is all."

"I don't cinch frame-ups in my bailiwick. Even known crooks runs free until I catch them right," Hassnan curtly advised. "An' I got enough of them in here now, without havin' a hellcat like you come dumpin' your saddle on my step."

"Yah!" Frey growled. "I don't savvy—"

Hassnan pawed in an inside pocket, got a letter with his left hand and shook it out. He stepped back, still covering Frey, and studied the missive briefly, as though he'd read it many times before.

"It's a letter from the authorities in Cantrin County, *hombre*," Hassnan said. "Tellin' me you'd wiggled out of charges of

murder an' robbery an' was headin' this way. You're a gunnie, a rustler, an' a low-down skunk that's been pretty smart so far. Cutter Frey, badman an' road-agent. Hmmn."

"Nobody's ever been able to swear I drawed first; never did prove I done murder, or stole nothin'," Frey jeered. "You can't do nothin' about me bein' here, an' you knows 'er."

"I got enough buzzards roostin' in my county now, without you comin' to help put more stink in their cache!" Hassnan bellowed. Frey's affrontery of the law, his mocking, was getting under Hassnan's leathery hide. He reddened, his cheeks puffed, he swelled.

"You'll fog!" he shouted, leaping forward and jamming his gun stiffly into Frey's wind again. Frey gasped and bent forward. Hassnan swung his rocky left fist, hooked Frey on the nose and sent him reeling back against the bar. He sapped Frey with the barrel of the weapon, gripped him by the open collar of his shirt and jerked him this way and that.

Another left, then, as he threw Frey hard against the bar; a blue lump appeared on Frey's forehead and he went to his knees, his nose streaming blood, his head wobbling. Hassnan swung his foot to Frey's ribs and then stepped back.

Choking, Frey gripped the edge of the mahogany and pulled himself up, where he stood unsteadily, face quivery, restraining himself only because Hassnan had that gun on him. There wasn't a man in the room that was so blind he couldn't read deadly anger, killing determination in Frey's every gesture and expression.

Even Hassnan seemed no little appalled. He stepped back. "Easy, Frey," he cautioned, his voice low. Louder, then, when Frey got hold of himself:

"I don't want to have to kill you, hombre. So you shake the dust of Vego off your feet. What I jest give you was a sample. Where you are, is hell; like I said, I a'ready got too much of that."

"You ain't got nothin'!" Cutter Frey ground forth. "You think you got trouble with a few measly li'l' stage hold-ups an' road-agent stuff like that. By Gawd, lawhoun', you've asked for trouble—an' trouble is what you'll get. No law, no man alive, can beat me up while he's holdin' a gun on me an' make 'er stick."

"I'm makin' it stick," Hassnan ominously warned. His voice was low, cold now; he'd gained control of himself. "In an hour, Frey, you be ridin' out of town."

He holstered his gun and turned on his heel. The batwing doors swung to and fro to mark his leaving.

Frey regained his guns. He stood at the bar, corners of his thin lips drawn truculently downward, and downed several drinks in rapid succession. Nobody mocked him, or belittled his badness because he'd been manhandled. The circumstances had been all against him. Too, if Hassnan called him bad, and figured him bad enough medicine that this county could not take him—that meant he was a *malo* hombre from pretty far back down the trail.

So they left Cutter Frey severely alone. They did, however, watch him covertly, and wondered what he aimed to do.

Frey fingered his nose and tenderly touched the bump on his head. He swore viciously to himself, then turned, as if to defy any man in the place to open his mouth. His squinted eyes rested upon Meance and Waunch. Meance lifted his glass and tossed off a drink. His arm, when he sat the glass down, curved toward the door, and a stiffened little finger pointed north. Waunch almost closed his eyes, then opened them slowly.

Cutter Frey nodded almost imperceptibly, smacked his glass down on the bar and stalked out. He hairpinned his horse and rode north from Vego. A mile out, where a lone bull-pine kept lonely sen-

tinel beside the road, Frey reined up and waited, watching a dust trail that approached rapidly.

Meance and Waunch came up, looked back, then up ahead, where the road ascended a slope that led on upward to low hills dotted here and there with light growths of stunted timber.

"Well?" Frey truculently demanded. "What is it?"

"Don't use that tone of voice, feller!" Meance snapped. "We might not like it."

"An' what we don't like—" Waunch began.

"Ah! You think you want fight, to add a notch to your guns," Frey flung at them. "A'right—"

"Stave it off," Meance barked. "We don't want fight with you. Nope, Cutter Frey—we're ridin' the same trail you ride, an' offerin' you a chance to get some hunk."

"My trail, eh?" Frey grunted. "Where the leaves rustle; where you—"

"—hear the owl hoot," Meance interposed.

"An' things comes to them as takes," Waunch cackled.

Frey shook his head. "She's my own job," he avowed. "That law figgers he put a burr under my tail. Why, damn him, he begged for it. If he thinks the express company has been bothered before, he's goin' plumb loco after this. An' when he crosses my trail, he gets it."

"Listen," Meance urged. "They ain't no sense in us tanglin'. These Butterfields is ours. The express shipments is ours. You go it alone, they'll be trouble around. Come in with us. You can make it hot for Hassnan that way. Yeah, an' knock down his meathouse when the sign is right."

Frey considered. Finally, he nodded. "I'll look your layout over," he agreed. "If she sounds right, an' pays right, I'll come in with you for a spell."

He gathered up his reins. "Where's your hide-out?"

"We don't hide like that," Meance boasted. "We got things comin' our way. Hassnan can't prove nothin', an' we're ridin' high, wide an' handsome. Wait'll you see what we got."

Frey rode with them on into the hills. Rode until the comfortable white house of the Three Links Ranch was in sight, and the range was dotted with prime cattle burned with the Three Links iron. They rode on to the house, turned their horses into the corral and went silently across the ranch yard.

Stamping into the kitchen of the house, with Frey behind them, Meance and Wanch flung off their hats and sat down at the table. "Sit," Meance invited. And then—"This is Cutter Frey, Beak. It's like this . . ." He went on to tell the big-nosed man who'd been at the table when they came in, how the sheriff had beaten Frey up in town. No mention of outlawry, however, did he make. Frey wondered.

"Well, sit!" Meance half-angrily commanded when Frey remained standing.

"I gotta wash up—an' I sit when I get damn' good an' ready!" Frey snarled back.

Beak Arey sniffed. "One of these toity chaparral runners, eh?" he jeered.

"Hey, Shirley!" Meance roared.

A moment, and then a girl came from somewhere toward the front of the house. Her cheeks were flushed and she glared at Meance. There was fear, too, in the way she looked and acted. She looked at Cutter Frey, caught her breath sharply.

"I'm not to be called like a dog!" she flared at Meance.

"I like 'em with spirit," Meance applauded. Then, harshly: "Get Cutter Frey,

Where The Leaves Rustle And The Owl Hoots

here, some hot water. He's got a weak stummick, an' can't relish his grub when he's got dust on his paws."

"Thank heavens there's at least cleanliness about him—even if he must be a pretty low type to associate with you," the girl answered, flinging back the lid to the water-well at the end of the cookstove.

Cutter Frey chuckled indulgently, took the pan she thrust into his hands, thanked her politely and sat the pan on a bench beside the door. While she put more food on the table, she studied him covertly. Meance noted it. He roared at her:

"Never mind goo-goo eyein' him. He ain't got no time to do no girlin', like I have. Your uncle told me to look out for you, an' I sure's hell will. When he gets back, you'll be different. I can tell you."

"You yell too much," Frey growled, coming to the table. "I never liked men thet yowled big an' bad at wimmen. I reckon it's time you had a real man to help you—"

"Shut up. Not here," Waunch hissed.

The meal finished, the four got up and went out. Looking back, Frey saw the girl watching him. The hopeless set of her tired face, that he'd at first noticed, seemed relieved a bit now. He said a few unprintable things under his breath and followed Meance on to the corral.

"First thing," Meance warned, "you let Shirley Venable alone. Second thing, you recognize I'm big wind around this ranch."

"Wind? Yeah," Frey retorted. Meance scowled, but let it pass.

"All you got to do is sit here on your rear an' wait 'till I say go," Meance continued.

"An' what does that buy me?"

"You figger to th'ow in with us?"

"If it'll gimme a pop at *dinero* an' Hassnan, *seguro*."

Meance looked at Waunch and then at Beak. "Sure," Waunch said. "Tell 'im. If he gets big notions, we'll be four to his one."

"If that's to make me boogery, don't waste time tryin'," Frey said lazily, yawning broadly. "If you got somethin' to spill, Meance, let's have a listen to your talk."

"It's big talk," Meance said. "It's talk like there's a cash shipment of gold coin comin' through Vego someday quick. It'll be guarded to the brisket on the road where we've held up a half a dozen stages lately. That was one reason we fished after small ones. The stage don't leave Vego for four hours, then. That shipment'll be in the express office all that time.

"Near twenty thousand in gold coin, Frey, will be left in there, an' they won't be guardin' it, because they'll never figger a raid on the office, right in town."

Frey's attention was bent on rolling a smoke. He clucked thoughtfully, struck a match, nodded. "After you get it, in a raid in town, they'll be hell poppin'. How you gonna come back here?"

"That's the point," Meance told him. "We ain't."

"This aint your ranch, then, eh?"

"Sim Venable owned this place, Frey. He signed a paper to effect I owned a half share, an' then went on a vacation for a while. That paper stands good. I'm runnin' the spread while he's gone. Hassnan don't like 'er, but they ain't nothin' he can do. Just like he's tried to prove it was us holdin' up them stages—an' can't. We're always back here when a posse comes, an' we don't leave no tracks."

"This girl?" Frey asked.

"You forget her!" Meance warned. "I'll have my way with her before we leave, or take her with me. I ain't made up my mind yet."

"I don't want her!" Frey spat. "But I ain't bein' party to no shinnery of holdin' wimmen captive. If you c'n explain her, I don't care what you do with her. Get that?"

It seemed to Frey that Menace was taking an awful lot from him. Also, it seemed odd that Meance should desire to cut an-

other in on a hold-up that already was cut and dried. Too, Meance was talking too readily. To Frey, that meant one thing: They did not expect him to be with them long—nor live long! That only one thing could follow, along this line of reasoning, was sure: Frey was going to lend his gun, and then be a toes-up fall-guy when the smoke of battle cleared. He wondered if they didn't know such things might work two ways.

"That girl," Meance was explaining, "come here just a few days after her uncle got—went away to take a rest. Seems her folks died a long time back, an' her uncle'd been sending her to school an' keepin' her in the east. Or somewhere, nohow. She got the notion to surprise him, an' walked in, a week afore she was due.

"Her uncle had told me to look out for her when she come, until he got back. Well, before he does get back, I'm sellin' the Three Links down to the culls an' takin' plenty care of the girl."

"You got 'er foolproof there," Frey admitted. "Only, if this damned coyote Hassnan should find that paper a forgery before—"

"Who said it was forged?" Meance bristled.

"Hell!" Frey snorted his disgust. "This here Sim Venable wouldn't go off an' leave you like that, an' with his niece comin'. He wouldn't sell out to you like that, I bet. Nope. I bet Mister Venable ain't never comin' back, an'—"

"All right; he ain't! He'll have a helluva time crawlin' out of that west-pasture well, even if he hadn't been busted plenty. But that paper's right. Beak knows some cute tricks, an' Venable give up head—before he fell in that well."

Frey stiffened. Now, he knew they didn't figure him long on earth. Hombres like Meance didn't spill such things to new owl-hooters they'd taken in. Not even when those road-agent gents had been beaten up by the sheriff and aimed at hitting back.

Meance was cute enough to steal a ranch and things like that. But not smart enough to credit anyone else with being able to see a pumpkin through a picket fence. Which, Frey allowed, was like to be too damned bad for Meance and his crew. Frey was figuring what he could do with a pile of money all his own. And maybe a girl.

"Well?" Meance demanded.

Frey looked at the three of them. They had said four-to-one. He wondered about that fourth. They were watching him, their guns. "I'm your huckleberry," Frey assured Meance. "She sounds damn good to me."

And right then, he was fairly aching to draw his gun and take the whole thing over for himself. That he'd have to kill them made little difference to him. He'd rather enjoy that. But the chances of being killed himself restrained him. That—and other things.

Three Links wasn't overly large. During the ensuing three days, Frey and the others had it combed of every prime head of beef it contained—which was little more than a hundred head. A tidy sum at that, however. Now, Frey figured, if he owned this range, he'd run at least six times that many head. Which brought him to realization that he wasn't in position to go to ranching here.

They drew the stuff into the corral and the enclosed winter feed lot, and left them there. It was on the second day, when Frey's horse chucked a shoe, that he rode back to the house to nail the plate back on.

His back to the house, he became possessed of the feeling that he was being watched. His hand dropped to his gun the instant he dropped the horse's foot from between his knees. He spun, his face bleak, wintry. Cutter Frey was not one, it was apparent, who liked folks coming up or staring from behind.

He grinned ashamedly, then, and straightened. "I'm sorry, Miss Venable," he apologized.

"You frightened me, terribly," the girl admitted. "I've been standing here a minute or so, wondering if I should speak to you."

"Why, I reckon I won't bite. What is it?"

"Mister Frey, I want to know what's going on here," she blurted, as though afraid she might weaken.

"Goin' on? Why, nothin', ma'm. Nothin', only that them steers has got to be shipped."

"It's more than that, and you know it," she charged. "My uncle should be back. And I don't believe he would leave things in charge of Meance, even if Meance owns half interest in the ranch. Also, Uncle Sim never mentioned Meance when he used to write to me.

"There's too much covert work, too much riding, too much meanness going on here, I tell you. And the way Meance looks at me—" She shuddered.

Frey's face had set stubbornly. "Why ask me?" he wondered aloud. "Ain't I one of them?"

"No!" she avowed. "You may be bad, but you aren't mean. You are clean, and polite, and you don't look at me as if I were—were—"

"I know," Frey saved her embarrassment. "But because I don't look at you like that, ain't a sign I don't like you." He turned back to his work. "Nope. I reckon you're jest worried over nothin'," he allowed.

"I know you like me. I could see it," Shirley Venable sobbed. "I'm afraid to leave, afraid to stay. If my uncle would only come! Because you like me is why I asked you. But you're like them all—"

She ran toward the house, crying.

"They say love'll turn the heart of even a badman," Frey soberly reminded himself as he rode out again. He wagged his head slowly. "Me—I wouldn't know about it, though."

The evening of the fourth day brought the fourth member of Meance's coyote pack back to the ranch. This was Turpin, who rode in on a jaded horse, flung himself off and rushed into the house. Shirley Venable had finished cooking supper and had gone to her room. Turpin spat it out:

"They're on the way with 'er, Meance," he blurted. "She'll hit Vego in the mornin'."

"Bueno!" Meance exclaimed. "Which means we got to get them cattle into the loadin' chutes an' get our cash for them in the mornin', too. We'll start them in about midnight."

He arose. "Guess that filly of Venable's would be a sort of nuisance on the trail. Guess I'll be tellin' her good-bye, while you boys get ready to haul." He grinned crookedly, the hot gleam of his eyes reflected meanly against the light.

"Jest a minute," Frey said, pushing his chair back and getting up. "You aim to sell them cattle in Vego in the mornin', get that express shipment, an' slope."

"That's the ticket," Meance growled.

"Then you got no time to fool with that girl," Frey admonished. "Leave her be. Tomorrow, when we start driftin', we split up. You c'n come by here, grab her up, an' go on."

"Yah! With Hassnan comin' here first—"

"Don't forget," Frey reminded, "Hassnan will be dead."

"An' so might you be," Meance snarled. He started out again.

"No woman is gonna bust up my chance of that much dinero," Frey swore, leaping over to put himself between Meance and the door. He was like a bristling, menacing mastiff, cold-eyed and dangerous. Meance sensed it. He looked slowly around at his men. He knew that Cutter Frey was bad, and that Frey would get him, perhaps

others, before they got Frey. Meance controlled the rage that flamed within him. Said:

"Maybe you're right, Frey. But are you sure you'll get Hassnan?"

"I was never more positive of anything in my life."

"You get him, no matter what?"

"I will."

"Then I guess I can afford to wait an' pick her up tomorrow."

The death-fraught moment was past, but the tension remained. Staub Meance was not one to take horning in from any man. They set about preparing to drive the beef to Vego. Frey slipped out. He circled the house and knocked softly against Shirley's window, putting light to a match so she might identify him.

Frey knew that death awaited him at both ends of the deal—if one small slip were made.

Shirley Venable was in Vego. She came in a roundabout way and got the sheriff out of bed. Calmly, Hassnan heard her: "There's something wrong at Three Links," the girl told him. "And they are all in town this morning. I heard Turpin mention gold—"

"Why, yes. I know," Hassnan said. "They plan to rob the express office."

"How do you know?"

"Why, well, I know. And when they try it, an express company detective, the express agent and me; we'll be ready. You stick here with my wife. I got to be goin' now."

"Wait!" Shirley begged. "There's a man

"At Daylight, Ride To Vega!"

She came close to the glass, whispering: "I've a gun. Don't—"

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed. "Get clothes on. At daylight, ride to Vego, an' keep out of sight. You ain't safe here, then, or now. Ride out—you hear!"

He joined the others then. At least Shirley would be safe—even if Meance got away from him. Meance figured Frey to lose out, making his play at Hassnan. Frey did not figure it that way.

They drove the herd slowly toward Vego and had it at the chutes when daylight kicked off the coverlid of night. Meance woke the Vego buyer up, and by nine that morning, had the money for the cattle in his poke. They watched the stage come in; saw the heavy express box carried into the office, and then drifted, to meet again back of the town.

Frey was nervous. He'd seen no sign of Shirley; no sign of Hassnan. He was hardly aware of what Meance was saying. And then, he was going forward, a neckerchief pulled over his face, his gun in hand.

called Frey. He warned me of my safety, and he's—well, he's not bad. Can't you—"

"Cutter Frey *is* a bad man," Hassnan disagreed, walking out.

Hassnan was a bit too late; for Meance had struck quicker than supposed. The sound of a shot, another and another boomed at him as Hassnan ran toward the express company's office.

A man ran backward out the door. Hassnan yelled and raised his gun. The man tripped and fell, and did not rise. Hassnan grunted, lowered his unfired gun and ran on. It was Turpin who lay in the dusty street, dead eyes staring at the soft morning sun.

Smoke, acrid and choking, drifted in layers inside the express office. Behind his counter, a white-faced agent banged a jammed shotgun against the floor. Beak Arey, grotesquely sprawled, lay near the counter, while Milo Waunch, clawing at his belly, shrieked as he writhed about the floor.

Crouched, a dark stain making his blue

shirt darker and plastering it to his left side, Cutter Frey was hunkered behind a box across the room. In an opposite corner, Staub Meance lay prone back of a little pile of mail sacks.

It had been hellish, in that stark moment when Meance had led them into the office. A sickening moment when the agent came up with his shotgun—when Cutter Frey stepped aside and squalled for Meance to get them up!

Turpin had opened the ball. A move for his gun, and the shotgun roared, spinning him around; driving him backward into the street. Beak Arey, going down before the beat of the gun in Frey's steady hand; Waunch, running almost onto the muzzle of that flaming pistol, to go down shrieking his fear of death.

Cutter Frey spun half about, dropped to his knees, then lunged behind the boxes. Meance laughed crazily.

"Come out, Meance. You've got it dead to rights. You got by with it a long, long time. But now, you're through." His answer was a bullet boring through the boxes near his head.

Outside, running feet boomed the board walk. A dark shadow flashed past the little window, and Frey glimpsed Hassnan running for the door. Hassnan, who'd mistaken the silence inside that reeking little place of death.

Nostrils dilated, eyes fiery points, Frey tensed. Hassnan slammed through the door.

Meance spurted to his feet, then; and so did Frey. His leap carried him toward Hassnan; the gun in his right hand filled the room with thunder, his back-thrusting left elbow came up, smashed Hassnan's nose, sending him staggering back outside.

"Ahhh!" Meance wailed. He lurched sideways, screaming until it seemed his throat must split; sat on the floor and hurled a spray of red drops around him as he wrung his mangled hand.

"It was meant for your belly," Frey snarled. "Your hand gettin' in the way will save you for a rope."

He turned, holding his hand to his side, and went out.

"Waunch is gone, but Meance'll live to spill his guts," he grunted "Better gather him up, Hassnan, before he gets ideas."

". . . put his body in the west well, an' that was that," Frey finished. He rolled a smoke and stared at Hassnan across the latter's desk in the jail office. Hassnan looked back at him with difficulty. His eyes were swollen in sympathy with a swollen nose.

"You're—you're a detective for the express company! And you and Sheriff Hassnan had it all planned!" Shirley Venable exclaimed. She turned to Hassnan when Frey nodded.

"But—but you said he was a bad man, Sheriff Hassnan."

"He is," Hassnan grunted sourly. "Bad on *hombres* like Meance. An' bad elsewise, too! Frey, wasn't no call for you to bust me on the smeller like you done."

"Ah," said Frey, "but there was. When we fixed it for you to beat me up in the Cowboy's Rest, I said to put it on to make me really mad. You did. Dammit, you overdone it, you ol' fool. So that poke in the snout will jest about even us up."

Hassnan said, "Arrrr!" and showed his teeth.

"Miss Venable was right worried about you," he said.

Frey got red in the face. He swallowed. "I got to ride out," he allowed. "I—I got to go now, an' make my report on this."

"Mister Frey—do you know where I can get someone to help me run Three Links?" Shirley asked, hopefully.

"Why—I'll send somebody back to you," Frey called back as he bolted for the door.

"Huh!" Hassnan grunted. "From the way he looked, I bet it's himself he'll be bringin' back to do that job."

The Sheriff fired into the dummy.

The Last Notch

by

L. R. SHERMAN

For Years He Had Traveled The Owl-Hoot Trail Looking For The Last Man—When He Found Him The Law Had To Stand Aside

Hugh Pelling, the two hundred pounds of sheriff at Coyote Wells, raised his drink half-way to his lips, then slowly returned the glass to the bar. Beside him the smaller man with the deputy's star pinned to his suspenders muttered something unintelligible as he followed the glance of his chief toward the door of The Lariat. Someone nearby muttered, "Th' editor" to his neighbor just before all conversation in the barroom ceased.

The young man who had just pushed aside the swinging gates and entered the room seemed oblivious to the tension his entrance had evoked. A pale-faced man, dressed in the clothes of the city rather than those of the cow country, and with a self-effacing manner that deceived until one caught a direct look from the sharp, blue eyes, he walked quietly to the bar and ordered a drink.

Likewise conspicuous by his self-effacement was a thin man with long, gray hair, floppy Stetson with a half-dozen holes in the crown, and clothes that looked as though they had fought a losing battle with a barrel-cactus, who sat alone at one of the little tables.

It was noteworthy that the table was in a corner and the man sat with his back in the angle where none could approach him

from the rear or from either side without being noticed. It was also noteworthy that the only thing about him which looked well-kept was the oiled holster and the darkly shining six-gun with its row of little notches filed in the back of the frame to which bone handles were attached. His narrowed, slate-gray eyes shifted to the newcomer, then back to the sheriff.

Pelling lifted his glass once more and this time downed the drink. He replaced the glass with a bang that sounded like a revolver shot and stalked the length of the bar to halt in front of the new publisher and editor of the Coyote Gazette.

"Just read this week's copy of th' Gazette, Spearman," he boomed. "An' I hope what you suggested is true, that you have a line on th' skunk who dry-gulched your father, and that you'll be ready to expose him in th' next issue. Want you to know I'm with you every step of th' way."

Young Dale Spearman's blue eyes sharpened slightly as he swung around and stared into the slightly bulging ones of Hugh Pelling.

"Thanks, sheriff. That'll give me courage to go on," he stated quietly.

If the officer heard a faint snicker from someone behind him, or detected the veiled sarcasm in the editor's tones, he failed to show it. His manner held to one of bluff heartiness.

"And I want to state further that if, as you also suggested, there was someone high in politics in Coyote County involved in th' plot your dad was about to expose before he was killed, all you gotta do is swear out a warrant an' I'll bring him in, even if it's th' district attorney or th' judge himself. Or if you'll give me a hunch who he is, I'll see that he don't leave th' county till you're ready to spring your trap."

"Thanks again. You might be able to bring him in if he's pointed out to you, even if you've accomplished little toward discovering his identity. If I need your help before next week's issue comes out I'll let you know," and, downing his drink, Dale Spearman swung around and walked out of The Lariat.

The sheriff returned to his former station at the rear of the room and poured himself another drink. This time, as he raised the glass, his eyes, gazing into the mirror of the back bar, noted the tall, thin man at the corner table. The glass checked its upward swing for a fraction of a second, then continued its way to the sheriff's lips. When he swung around slowly for a direct look at the man in the corner the newcomer to Coyote Wells was gazing toward the entrance. In this position a thin line along the angle of the jaw appeared as a little lighter shade than the mahogany of the balance of his weathered features.

Pelling stared hard at the man for a long moment and suddenly his eyelids half lowered in their attempt to conceal the light of sudden recognition and of an inspired idea that had flamed in them. He spoke in an undertone to his deputy and left the barroom by the rear door.

A few minutes after he had gone the deputy walked out through the front entrance. The man at the corner table watched him go, then arose and followed. He had scarcely shoved aside the bat-wing doors when he saw the man waiting in the shadow at the corner of the building. The officer called softly.

The thin man was already approaching him with a stride that had something feline about it, and that seemed always to keep the butt of his six-gun in drawing position.

"Th' sheriff wants to see you at his office in a half hour. Don't be seen goin' there. You needn't be afraid. No danger for you—an' maybe somethin' that might change your luck."

"Did you think I might be afraid?" The voice was soft, almost caressing, but in the

yellow glow from the barroom window the slate gray eyes seemed to be suddenly illumined from within by tiny sparkling lights, flashes of warning to those who could interpret them.

The deputy shrugged his shoulders. The other waited.

"Be there?" the officer finally asked.

"I'll go any place that'll change my luck," was the calm answer.

The deputy nodded and slipped down the passageway that led to the rear of the saloon. The thin man sauntered past the adjacent building and waited, glancing toward the rear. A moment later he recognized the big form of the sheriff and the smaller one of the deputy as they passed through the alley toward the lower end of the street.

"Th' sheriff waitin' in back for me, in case I left that way. Yep, I reckon I'll make that call," he reflected.

Fifteen minutes later he eased up to the window of the little shack that served the sheriff for living quarters and office and glanced through the crack at the bottom of the drawn curtain. Circling the cabin after a moment of observation, he entered noiselessly through a rear door and found himself in the officer's bunk-room. Directly ahead was a thin sliver of light at the bottom of another door and he catfooted to it, hesitated a moment, then swung it open and stepped swiftly inside.

Hugh Pelling and his deputy swung around, their hands darting to their guns.

"Sure you want to draw?" the soft-spoken stranger asked.

Their hands slowly moved away from their gun-butts, though the stranger had made no motion to go for his own weapon.

"You're early," challenged Sheriff Pelling.

The stranger lifted his shoulders slightly. "I figure it sometimes pays to walk into the trap before it's set."

The big man flushed a little, then turned to his desk, picked up a dodger and placed it on the table between himself and his deputy.

"Yeah?" he growled with heavy sarcasm. "Think it ain't set this time?"

There was no mistaking the accipitrine features on the picture, nor the streak of a knife scar along the line of the jaw. The old dodger advertised a thousand dollars reward for the capture of "Laredo Cal," gunman, wanted for murder and robbery.

"You figurin' on collectin' that reward, sheriff?"

Once more the officer replied by placing something on the table before him. This time it was five one hundred dollar bills stripped from a thick roll he had taken from his pocket.

"Who you want killed?"

The sheriff's bulging eyes stared hard at the expressionless face of the thin man. Suddenly he grinned.

"You saw him tonight, Laredo. That squirt of an editor, Dale Spearman. There's another half thousand for you when the job's done," the sheriff snapped.

"An' you're comin' right out with your proposition 'cause you figure that if I refuse, or if I tell what you proposed, I'll only be stickin' my neck in th' noose. That it?"

The sheriff shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I've heard about you. I ain't makin' any threats or goin' for my gun unless I'm forced to. Don't think either Butch Denham here, or me'll try to stop you from goin' out."

"That's mighty kind of you," the other answered drily.

The sheriff's voice suddenly became silky. "But—they's a telegraph in this town. Laredo Cal, with a thousand on his head, wouldn't get far. Figure that out."

The gray-haired man nodded slowly and his narrowed eyes concealed some of the glitter that had once more sprung up in them.

'If you've heard about me, you heard I never been accused of dry-gulchin'."

"Why should I care how you handle the affair? Pick a fight with him an' give him th' first break for his gun—any way you like. Only get him!"

"Reckon I'll listen to some more. I don't go into things blind. Why do you want this job done? And where an' when do I get th' other five hundred?"

"Why? That's easy. His old man was th' high an' mighty editor of th' Coyote Gazette, an' he rode me ragged in his sheet about not breakin' up th' road-agent gang raisin' hell around here. An' all th' time he was head of that outfit himself. He'd built himself a swell alibi. I did get a couple of th' gang's scalps an' that's what made him frame me. He was comin' out th' next issue with what he claimed was proof that *I* was th' head of th' band. But th' rest of his gang thought he'd sold them out an' they got him.

"This kid, then, came on from th' east to take over his old man's job. He's found th' fake proof his old man had hid an' is goin' to publish that. 'Course there ain't no proof I killed his old man, but that's what th' crazy kid thinks. An' at that he might be headin' me for a dance on thin air 'cause I did my duty an' got two of th' gang. But th' real killer is evidently scared. He sent th' kid a letter warnin' him to lay off. Instead of usin' his head, Spearman acted smart and published th' letter in his first issue. But am I goin' to take a chance of bein' framed—I am like hell.

"You do this job, get th' big envelope in his safe containin' th' frame-up proof, an' you get a free pass into Mexico with a thousand cold cash in your pockets."

Laredo Cal thought a moment, then finally nodded his head.

"Sounds all right. Now answer th' next question. When an' where do I get th' second payment?"

Pelling appeared to think for a moment. Finally he spoke without looking up.

"Let's see, now. I gotta make a show of going after you. Soon's I hear about the murder, me'n Butch, here, will maybe pick up two, three others an' take your trail. We'll lose it an' I'll ride off alone to continue th' hunt. In th' meantime, you head straight for th' canyon country west of Coyote Wells. There's a double opening in th' cliffs. Go into th' northern one an' that'll take you along a canyon that later swings south and will take you over th' border. Wait for me just beyond where she makes th' swing southward. Got it?"

"You Mentioned The Notches On My Gun!"

The older man nodded slightly and remained silent for a time. When he did speak again his tones were still soft, but his eyes were hard as marbles of volcanic glass.

"You mentioned th' notches on my gun. If you know anything about Laredo Cal you know them five notches don't cover half th' hombres who thought they could beat me to my hog-leg. Those little marks're for special cases—f'r polecats who tried to double-cross Laredo Cal. I'm just mentionin' this 'cause there's still room for one more notch an' I'm not takin' that five hundred now. I don't take what I haven't earned. When th' job's done you c'n give me th' whole thousand."

A queer expression flitted across the big sheriff's face and disappeared almost as soon as it was formed. He grinned briefly as he picked up the money and shoved it back into his pocket.

"Okay! I'll bring it all along. And just as a suggestion; every evening young Dale Spearman comes into The Lariat for his one drink, then goes directly to th' little white cottage at th' end of th' street where his father used to live. He lives there too and his safe is in his living room. He usually works in the evening and when he does th' safe door is most always open."

Laredo nodded. "I'll remember," and he slipped out noiselessly.

Sheriff Hugh Pelling, together with three hard-faced visitors to Coyote Wells, were seated at a center table in The Lariat the following evening when Dale Spearman entered for his solitary drink. The young publisher looked more than usually pale, and he appeared to notice no one until the sheriff called a hearty greeting. Spearman turned, with his glass in his hand, nodded briefly, swallowed his drink, and walked out.

As his rapid strides took him along the main street of Coyote Wells a shadowy form slipped from the doorway of a deserted building and, slinking from shadow to shadow, followed silently. Now and then, when for a brief space he passed through the glow from a lighted window, ragged clothes and a dilapidated Stetson could be distinguished.

A couple of hundred feet behind this trailer, but on the opposite side of the street, a third man walked in the same direction. He made no pretense of keeping to the shadows and several times nodded to others coming towards him. The light in front of a saloon door exposed him as Butch Denham, deputy sheriff. At a corner, less than a hundred yards from the little cottage which Dale Spearman had just entered, Denham waited until he saw the man following the editor steal around toward the rear of the building. Butch then pushed through the doors of a saloon.

He called to the bartender and ordered drinks for the dozen early customers in the place. While the bottle was being passed three reports, but slightly muffled, caused him to stiffen and swing toward the door.

"Somethin' up," he snapped and started out.

As he reached the street a horseman clattered westward, barely visible in the faint light of the stars.

"There he goes! Come from behind Spearman's place," someone behind him cried as Butch started to run toward the cottage.

The front door was open and he halted there, staring into the room. Two or three of those who had followed were looking over his shoulders. On the floor in the center of the little room lay the body of Dale Spearman, face down, and a thin stream of blood was seeping from beneath his left armpit. By the publisher's motionless right hand lay a small revolver. Across the room the door of a small safe was open. Papers and several account books were scattered in front of it.

Butch Denham rapped out an oath, reached inside the door, and drew out the key. He swung the door shut and locked it, then faced one of the men who had followed him and handed the man the key.

"Bill, you stay here and don't let nobody in till th' coroner comes. Slats, you run over and bring Doc Sloan. I'm goin' for th' boss an' we're takin' th' trail of that skunk. We'll get him this time, sure," and he pushed his way through the little crowd and ran down the street.

Five minutes later Sheriff Hugh Pelling, his deputy, and the three men who had been drinking with him were burning the trail out of town, heading westward for the double canyon mouths leading into the rough country, the country where the sheriff had heretofore failed to break up the gang of road-agents he had accused young Spearman's father of leading.

Daylight found the posse close to the rocky battlements, rough crags and can-

yon-cut lands west of the rolling ranges around Coyote Wells. The sheriff apparently had forgotten his plan to lead his men on a blind trail, then separate himself from them to complete his agreement with the gunman. The five headed directly for the double canyon entrance and rode through the north opening in the long line of cliffs facing them.

Though they had traveled swiftly, they had not caught sight of Laredo Cal. The increasing unevenness of the ground had prevented that, but they knew by the occasional spoor which daylight revealed, that he had followed instructions, had preceded them by less than a half hour into the gorge down which they were riding.

At first the gorge twisted and turned unevenly as it took a general northwesterly direction. Finally there was a long straight stretch leading directly west. At the end of this could be seen a sharp turn, almost at right angles.

Halfway down this stretch Sheriff Pelling, in the lead, suddenly raised his hand and slowed his horse to a halt. He swung down, sliding his rifle from its saddle boot. Each of the remaining four did likewise. Keeping close to the southern wall, they eased forward on foot, leaving their horses ground-tied with trailing reins.

Somewhere ahead of them, around the bend, a jay was squawking raucously. Pelling looked over his shoulder at Butch Denham, directly behind him. The deputy grinned and nodded.

"He's there, an' he won't get out," he breathed.

"Couldn't very well be any place else," the sheriff grunted. "Easy now," and as he proceeded he watched every step that no dry twig might be snapped or loose pebble kicked.

The reason for the officer's conclusion became apparent as the turn in the gorge was reached. The canyon did not continue south to the border, but ended in a convergence of the cliffs less than a hundred yards from the bend.

Hugh Pelling sank to one knee and motioned his men up without turning around. They grouped beside and behind him, and the hammers of five rifles were drawn soundlessly to full cock as triggers were depressed to silence the sharp clicks of the mechanisms. At the base of a stunted cedar, leaning against its bole, could be seen a seated form. The battered hat pulled low over the face, the ragged clothing merging with the gray of the cliffs, the rocky canyon floor and the dark tree trunk, left no doubts as to whose it was.

Pelling fired first and the others followed in a crackling volley. Puffs of dust were faintly visible from the reclining form. It seemed to stiffen for a moment, then topple sideways, partially hidden by the tree trunk as it lay motionless on the ground.

The sheriff stood up with a grunt of relief and a wide, thick-lipped grin of pure satisfaction. He glanced back briefly at his men.

"An', in his day, that Laredo Cal had th' reputation of bein' one of th' cleverest hombres along th' border. But his day's long past, and it'll sure never come again, now. He didn't have sense enough to realize he was too old to travel th' hoot-owl again, or to match his slowin' wits with a man half his age. Bet he wasn't even any good on th' draw no more. Well, let's get th' stuff he took for me an' then rope him to his horse an' start th' parade back to Coyote Wells. Our troubles are all over now."

Pelling strode forward, his rifle carried in his left hand. He and his men were half way across the narrowed canyon and within a dozen yards of the prone figure when a softly drawled question from the rear caused him to drop his rifle and whirl around, crouching.

"This what you're lookin' for, Sheriff?"

Around the bend, and in the shadow of the eastern wall, was the barely discernible figure of a tall, thin man. There was nothing dilapidated about the black, wide-brimmed Stetson he wore, or the dark blue flannel shirt and denim :rousers, but there was no mistaking the lean figure, the long gray hair, or the hawklike features. He was holding out in his left hand a large manila envelope. His right hung loosely, inertly at his side.

Hugh Pelling said nothing. He only stared, and his bulging eyes seemed ready to pop from his head while his big body swelled with the long, slow breath he was inhaling.

"Kinda wondered what results a few cedar boughs stuffed in my old clothes'd bring. Can't say I was surprised. You panned out just about what I figured, plenty of yellow, but no gold."

Pelling's glance had darted around the blind end of the canyon. Laredo Cal was alone, there was no doubt about that. Confidence returned and the sheriff found his voice.

"An' what th' hell do you figure you gained by that? I'm thinkin', at that, it'll be better to take you back alive. You tell all you know. It won't hurt me. Nobody in Coyote Wells will take Laredo Cal's word against mine. An' there's that reward for you. Might be just's well for me to collect that, too."

"I don't reckon you'll collect it, sheriff. Guess you don't get all th' news. That dodger's been dead a long time. I killed it myself when I got th' man who committed that robbery and murder and blamed it on me. He confessed before he died. He's th' second notch on my gun. No, I don't reckon you'll take me back alive. You see, if I give myself up, it'd just be like a skunk of your stripe to put a bullet through th' back of my head for tryin' to escape. Don't reckon I'll take that chance."

"Uh-huh! You're right! We won't take you back alive."

"Just a minute, sheriff," Laredo put in. "You forgot a little somethin' I said back in your office. I wasn't talkin' for my health when I told you they was room for one more notch on th' old gun, a notch for the last polecat who came my way. Remember that?"

The soft voice ceased and there was a long moment of silence. The manila envelope had disappeared into one of Laredo's hip pockets. The thin man seemed to have shortened as he took a backward step which brought him to a half crouch close to a dark streak in the cliffs. But whatever might be said about Hugh Pelling it could not be truthfully claimed that he was a coward, at least not with everything at stake and four hard-shooting gunmen at his back. Nor had the reputation of Laredo Cal, or the failure of his first ruse to drygulch the gunman robbed the big sheriff of his wits. He had been doing some fast and concentrated thinking. He began to speak again, and his voice was conversational, almost friendly.

"When I said we wouldn't take you back alive, Laredo, I meant that our little trick had failed and I was admitting it. That other canyon, south of here, really does lead into Mexico, and I'm still willing to stick to my agreement, now that I have to. You needn't worry about these boys. They won't say a word. So haul out that yellow envelope again, and here's the thousand I promised you. We'll just call it square and—"

His right hand, which had gone behind him to his hip pocket, appeared suddenly.

Instead of a sheaf of currency it held a snub-nosed thirty-eight. No one could tell just exactly what happened as the gun appeared. The big forty-five at Laredo's thigh seemed to leap into his hand of its own accord, and to dart out two points of flame the split second the muzzle snapped into line.

Pelling's thirty-eight spat fire into the ground at his feet as he slowly folded at the waist and threw out his left hand, trying to break the fall of his big body. But by the time he pitched forward all strength had gone from the arm. It buckled, failed to protect him, and he crashed down on his face, rolled over, and stared at the rim-rock with slowly glazing eyes.

Thundering shots broke out from the six-guns of the others, until they discovered there was nothing to shoot at. After his two shots Laredo Cal had leaped backward and disappeared in the dark streak in the cliff behind him. The lead of the posse hammered against the face of the cliff, or ricocheted and went whistling and whining up the canyon. Three carefully spaced lances of orange fire from the blackness of the crack and two of the men dropped their guns while a third's right leg refused suddenly to hold him up any longer.

"Cover!" Butch Denham yelled, gripping a shattered arm and hurrying for the bend around which they had come. One had reached the shelter of a small boulder. One had raced back and dropped behind the cedar. Another, lying in the open with a lead-punctured leg, clawed his way toward a second boulder.

"Keep th' ball rollin', hombres. I'm all loaded up and ready to play again," called a voice from the crack in the cliff.

But there was no reply. Every man was listening to a faint, almost imperceptible hammering which could mean only one thing. It grew increasingly louder until even Laredo in the shelter of the crevice could hear it. Horsemen approaching!

"Reckon if you don't want to play any longer you better throw them hog-legs in th' open an' get on your feet with your hands scratching clouds," the concealed gunman called.

There were seconds of hesitation when the men glanced at each other and swiftly examined the walls of the trap their dead leader had picked to catch his victim. No escape up those straight-sided cliffs. No escape down the canyon, and no chance to find cover where they could put up a fight. There was only one answer. One of them cursed, tossed his six-gun and rifle into the open, and stood up with his hands hat-high. One by one the others followed his example.

There was movement in the mouth of the crack and Laredo Cal appeared. His six-gun had been returned to its leather, but that brought no crazy notions of trying for a hide-out gun to any of those who had seen what happened to Hugh Pelling when the sheriff had flashed his gun.

"Better move together and then walk over to the cliff, facing it. And keep the hands in plain sight till th' boys get here to pluck them guns some of you're carryin' under your shirts," he rapped, all the softness gone from his voice this time.

The men moved, one of them hopping on one foot, and there was little hesitation on the part of any of them. Butch Denham, who had nearly reached the curve before the sound of approaching horsemen halted him, checked himself as he stared down the canyon, amazement twisting his lean features. He cursed softly to himself.

The sound of the riders had announced them near the curve. Suddenly they rounded it and, in their lead, rode the pale-faced Dale Spearman, publisher of the Coyote Gazette, whom Butch Denham had seen lying dead on the floor of his living room, a stream of blood flowing from a bullet hole in his side. Behind him were other substantial citizens of Coyote Wells.

They swung from their horses and approached, at Laredo's invitation, to take charge of the prisoners.

The old gunman grinned at the astonished deputy. "Never occurred to you, Denham, to examine th' body, did it? I figured you wouldn't take th' time if Dale played his part well enough. If you'd 'a looked inside his shirt you'd 've found uh sack of blood he was squeezin' with his arm. Come from uh jackrabbit I got early yesterday. But if you'd discovered that, you wouldn't be here. An' it ain't so hard to put a bullet hole through uh shirt. By th' way, since your boss is dead, you can have this envelope if you want it. Nothin' there but scrap paper. Dale's turned his stuff showin' th' sheriff was leader of your outlaw gang over to th' District Attorney. He didn't have proof of who murdered his father, but I reckon I got th' right man. That's what I come to Coyote Wells for."

Laredo Cal's eyes narrowed suddenly as he made his final observations and their glance bored into the astonished eyes of the deputy. Butch Denham nodded slowly.

"Yeah! Th' sheriff shot him in th' back from an' upstairs window of Th' Lariat, then sneaked out th' back way quick an' come up from down th' street."

"And what about those two of his gang th' sheriff is supposed to have killed?"

"He did kill 'em. They was weakenin' after readin' th' Coyote Gazette an' Hugh figured they was about ready to tell all they knew to save themselves."

"This all th' gang?"

"I guess it is, Uncle Cal," young Spearman suddenly put in. "Dad's evidence states there were only seven altogether, with Pelling and Denham. Two are dead and there are three others here."

"That right?" Laredo snapped, swinging once more to Denham. The deputy nodded glumly.

"One more job, and I reckon my work will be all done," the old gunman stated slowly as he drew a small file from a vest pocket.

The young editor glanced from the body of the sheriff to the gnarled hands of Laredo Cal as he filed a nick in the back of the butt-frame of the battle scarred Colt.

"Reckon I'll make this one a cross," he observed, as though to himself.

"Why?" Dale asked.

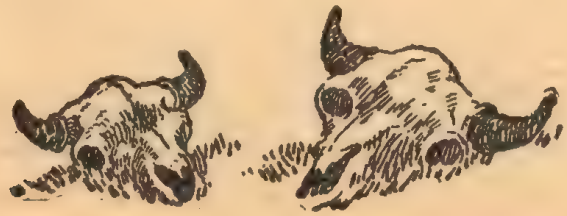
"Th' others represent hombres who double-crossed me. This means that, but it means more—it represents th' man who drygulched my brother."

Dale Spearman watched him for a time. Finally, with a faint smile, he asked, "That about fills it up, Uncle Cal. What're you goin' to do now, when you want to file another notch?"

Laredo looked up.

"My gun-slinging days are over, son. I've said that before. But this time I'm sure. This is th' last notch. The old Colt goes into cold storage after today."

Young Spearman's smile broadened, but he didn't say anything. He was thinking that, old as his uncle was, in spite of the declaration, he'd hate to be any man on whose trail Laredo might decide it necessary to camp.



LEFT-HANDERS ARE POISON

By BEN F. TIBBY

They Whipsawed Him To A Standstill. Then Came The Day When It Cost Them Plenty To Learn Which Hand J. Canby Drew With

Luke Daggert leaned with folded arms across the pommel of his creaking new saddle and shot a contemptuous glance at the man below him.

"Howdy, neighbor," began Daggert after a moment, breaking a thin smile. "Me and Doc here jist rode over to see you on a little matter of business that mebbe won't take more than a minute or two to fix up. You see, some of your hands takin' short cuts to the hills has been cuttin' our fences again, and a bunch of our choice heifers has strayed off into the timber. Course you know they can't be rounded up without considerable trouble, and we figure you might want to settle with us for the damages."

A slight tightening of concern, almost of fear, settled on Joe Canby's wind-weathered face. "Couldn't have been my men, Luke," was the constrained reply. "We ain't been working down your way for weeks — not since the last time you was here."

Luke Daggert sniffed disdainfully. "You suggestin' we cut our own fences?" The speaker patted the smooth ivory butt of his gun. "Course, if you want to argue the matter, I ain't above resortin' to first principles to settle it."

Canby's eyes, instead of slitting at the challenge, widened perceptibly, and with a furtive, nervous movement he adjusted the belt from which hung the weapon at his right side, as if the heavy-framed forty-five were an unfamiliar object offering a menace to its bearer instead of a protection. "You know I ain't for that sort of thing, Luke," he said in a slow, flat voice. Then he added, "What you figure you been put out?"

The mounted man thought ponderously for a space. "Well, them cattle is pretty well scattered by now. Say we make it two hundred dollars this time," he conceded. He threw a knowing look at the horseman by his side. "That agreeable with you, Doc?"

Doc Smithen, a rangy, permanently dirty cowboy, finished building a cigarette with insolent deliberation before he growled in answer, "That'll be all right this time, mebbe."

"But that's a heap more than it'll cost you," protested the Two-Bar owner weakly.

Luke Daggert flashed anger and sat upright in his seat. One hand dropped suddenly from the pommel to his side, and the glint of gun-metal flashed in the bright sunlight. "Listen, Canby. I'm damned tired of the trouble you been puttin' me to, and I'm warnin' you now that it'll cost you a pile more than two hundred the next time it happens. I been lettin' you off kind of easy up to now because we're neighbors, but I kin see you don't appreciate what I been doin'."

Canby's lips made odd little grimaces.

"I ain't got that much money here at the ranch," he finally offered, shifting from protest to concession. "I'd have tuh ride into Rifle to the bank for it."

"Suits us," said Daggert shortly, slipping his drawn gun back into its holster. "We'll meet you in the Ten Spot tomorrow mornin' right after the bank opens.

And I ain't no hand to be kept waitin'," he added ominously. "Savvy?"

Once out of sight of the ranch house the horsemen drew rein into easier pace.

"It's gettin' easier to do every time we try it," chortled Luke Daggert to his riding companion.

"Jist delivers peaceable, and then tucks his tail between his legs like a scared coyote and sneaks off," said Smithen. "What you suppose Canby packs a gun for, anyhow? Mebbe to weight hisself down so he won't fall out of his saddle. Eh?"

Luke Daggert shrugged. The question was unanswerable. "He don't somehow stack up like a ranny that's yeller," he observed, "and I sure never would have figured him that way if I hadn't seen him with my own eyes back down before that sheepherder in the Ten Spot. Howsomever, we ain't done so bad out of him, one way and another."

"Yeah," agreed the other. "With the money we been bleedin' him for, and with the stock of his that's been wanderin' off to git mixed up permanent with ours, we've had a pretty fair winter. How long you reckon we can keep this game up?"

"Till he's plumb busted and forks his hoss out o' this country for good."

Luke Daggert was growing impatient. Although the Rifle State Bank had been open for more than two hours, and the business at hand already delayed to that degree, Joe Canby had not appeared in the Ten Spot as directed. But Daggert's impatience and growing ill humor disappeared, and his dark, lowering face cleared and cracked into a thin grin of satisfaction as the bat-wing doors of the saloon were quietly pushed open. Canby had arrived.

A keener ear than Daggert's at that instant might have caught the positive clump of Canby's spurred boots as he strode across the sawdust covered plank floor, and a more discerning eye, the steady hand that poured and tossed off a drink. But Luke Daggert had tested Joe Canby's metal too often to be responsive to these subtle harbingers of the Two-Bar owner's mood.

With a little swagger in his gait, Smithen trailing at his elbow like a shadow, Daggert moved along the bar toward Canby and greeted, "Jist beginnin' to figure you wasn't goin' to show up. Thought you might have got throwed offen your livery stable hoss, or somethin'." This latter remark, to a cowboy, had a sharp edge of insult. "Been around to the bank?"

"Yeah," was the short response.

"Have a drink?" Daggert pounded the counter impatiently for the bartender.

"Jist had one."

"Suit yourself," Daggert said. He poured himself and Smithen brimming portions. Then, as he raised his drink toward his lips he hesitated, fingered the glass thoughtfully for a space, set it down again on the bar untouched. Something he had seen across the rim of his glass, the stony stare through the narrow slitted eyes of Canby, warned him not to risk the momentary abstraction of his liquor. "Say," he queried suspiciously, "did you bring that money along with you?"

Canby shook his head very slowly.

"You didn't?" snapped the unbelieving questioner as he moved out a pace to stand free of the counter.

"You mean you ain't intendin' to come through?" added Daggert.

"You're quick on the savvy this morning," was the drawled reply.

"Well, I'm damned!"

"And furthermore," were the amazing words, "I've come to collect from you two hombres the six hundred dollars you've already been paid."

A gentle but unmistakable shifting moved the onlookers out of direct line of the three men. Smithen, too, unobtrusively fell back several paces. But this was a move of strategy and not one of protection.

Daggert's roughly bantering manner disappeared in a flash and he curled his lips in a menacing sneer. His hand dropped carelessly to rest lightly on the handle of his gun.

"You know what you're invitin' yourself to, Canby?" he snarled.

"Go ahead and draw," was the startling rejoinder. "I'll give you the jump."

Whatever the cause for the slim cowboy's sudden reversal of form, someone was due to back down or taste hot lead. Doc Smithen's hand flashed to his side and his gun swished softly as it left the holster. The weapon actually cleared leather before a spurt of flame from Canby's hip froze the half raised arm. A bullet from

Smithen's forty-five ripped wildly into the floor.

As his stricken partner slumped to the floor, Luke Daggert galvanized into action. A sudden twitch of Canby's wrist; another crash. The gun in Daggert's hand flew from his nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor. Now he stood unarmed before the smoking muzzle of his antagonist's weapon.

"I could have drilled you too, Daggert," said Canby icily, "but as I told you a minute ago, I came here for that six hundred dollars." He sheathed his forty-five. "You high-tail it out of here now. I'll be back in an hour, and I expect you to be here with that money. And don't try to dust out of town. You understand?"

Shortly after, in the seclusion of a room above the Ten Spot Saloon, Smithen lay propped half sitting on a bed. "What you reckon come over Joe Canby that he went on the prod like that?" he observed with effort. "He ain't never showed fight before."

Luke Daggert, glowering in silence at his own crudely bandaged hand, ignored the question.

"You noticed, didn't you," the man on the bed added, "that he handled his gun with his left hand. I ain't never seen Joe Canby draw before, but I know for certain he's always packed his smokepole on the right side until this mornin'."

"What the hell do I care what side he slings his gun on," snapped Daggert. "He's discovered how to use it all of a sudden, ain't he?"

"You aim to hand him back that money?"

Daggert stared out of the uncurtained window for a long time as he mulled over his problem. Although acceding to Canby's demand would openly add to the ignominy of the affair, Luke Daggert was prey to a growing distaste for forcing conclusions with the Two-Bar rancher again. "I'd give a lot to know what turned that pole-cat, Joe Canby, into a hombre tougher than a piece of rawhide and carryin' a draw quicker than chain lightnin'," he ruminated aloud. "Mebbe," he concluded, "we better give it back to him and work him over accordin' to some other idea."

"Sure," agreed Smithen, a note of over-anxiousness creeping into his voice.

After drawing six hundred dollars from the bank, Luke Daggert turned his reluctant steps toward the Ten Spot again. His well ordered scheme of blackmail had suddenly collapsed and an accounting was at hand. He found Canby waiting for him in the saloon.

Fully aware of the eyes turned on him as he entered the place, Daggert assumed his usual swaggering stride. At best, those watching him so intently would have no knowledge of the real facts behind the transfer of the money. Perhaps, too, in a favorable turn he could gain the upper hand. But the possibility of resistance softened at sight of his enemy. Approaching close, Daggert thrust the packet of currency toward the waiting cowboy, who took it and shoved it carelessly into the pocket of his chaps without looking.

In spite of his outward submission, there was a baleful fire in Luke Daggert's eyes. "There you are," he growled. "That squares us." He could not, however, resist the impulse of adding the fateful words that were to prove his final undoing. "I'll git you for this, Canby, so help me. I've made you eat crow before and I can do it again."

As he turned to go, he felt the forceful jab of a gun barrel against his ribs, and his weapon was yanked clear of its sheath.

"Daggert," was the cold voiced answer to the threat, "I'm going to give you a chance right now for a show-down." The cowboy broke Daggert's gun open, removed all the cartridges except one, spun the chamber, and then laid the weapon on the bar. He followed the same procedure with his own Colt, which he then unexpectedly pressed firmly against the other man's stomach. Daggert's gun he returned to him butt first.

As Luke Daggert's fingers closed around the familiar ivory handle he knew that he had overplayed his hand. Canby's words were again drumming on his ears as if from far off.

"There's one cartridge in each gun," he was saying. "Mebbe your gun will bark first time you pull; mebbe not 'till your second pull; then, mebbe—" and the voice trailed off. "Same way with mine. Get yourself set and when I say 'go' you begin fannin' your hammer. Savvy."

Luke Daggert felt a chill creeping into his blood. He raised his forty-five slowly

and pressed it against the middle of his antagonist's spare figure. There was no yielding flesh here. The situation was out of hand, distasteful, ominous. His mind raced. He had heard of men fighting it out tied arm to arm, each with a knife in his free hand. But, somehow, he had never fancied that sort of thing. His mouth went suddenly dry. As he saw Canby's lips shape the word that was to begin the duel, he dropped his gun arm weakly to his side in surrender.

Canby reached out and took the forty-five from Luke Daggert's unresisting hand. Once more he broke the weapon. The single shell lay in the second chamber. Opening his own gun, Canby smiled a little derisively, his bullet lay in the fifth hole.

"You lack guts, coyote. From now on you tread soft and range careful. And here's somethin' to put down where you won't forget it—keep away from the north end of the valley. Next time we tangle I'm going to let you have it in the belly on the draw. Soon as I git around to it I'm going to look your cattle over. I got a sneaking idea I'm going to find something interesting!"

The beaten man turned dejectedly toward the stairway leading to his room above the saloon. Then the quiet tension in the place broke with a rising hum as the crowd surged toward the bar to surround Canby.

A brutal sun beat down on the almost deserted street of Rifle. To follow the welcome shade in its course around the building, Sheriff Jim Bennett and his visitor, Tom Rourke, of Cedar County, moved from their seats on two of the rows of empty kegs lined along the side of the Ten Spot to chairs on the narrow front porch of the saloon.

Next to Jim Bennett, as he tilted back against the welcome coolness of the adobe wall, sat Luke Daggert, his wide brimmed hat pulled well down over his eyes. If Daggert noticed the sheriff settling comfortably at his elbow he gave no sign.

The sheriff waved his hand in friendly gesture to a cowboy riding past.

"Likely looking hombre," appraised Rourke. He watched the horseman, narrow hips moulded easily into his saddle, trot slowly along the dusty thoroughfare. "I'm always leary, though of cowpokes as carry their artillery on the left side. I never seen one yet that wasn't plain poison in action. What moniker does he travel under?"

"J. Canby. He's owner of the Two-Bar outfit."

"And what might the 'J' stand for?"

"Nobody knows exactly which it is—or if they do they ain't sayin' nothing. You see, Joe Canby drifted into this section a couple of years ago and set up at the Two-Bar. But it wasn't long before he was in trouble of one sort and another. Seems like Joe wasn't no hand with a gun, for some reason that ain't never come out. But things got to goin' so bad for him he sent up to Montana for his brother Jeb to help him out. Them two boys looked as much alike as a couple of blackbirds on a rail, and to make it more confusin' they never traveled together except on their own range. Jeb, who turned out to be quicker than a bear trap with a forty-five, arrived jist in time to take a hand when Joe was bein' whipped around a stump by a couple of tough hombres.

"Yeah," continued the sheriff. "Joe always packed his gun on his right side, although, as I say, he wasn't never known to use it. Jeb, to the contrary, slung his on his left leg, greased and ready for action. Soon as Jeb arrived both of them showed up wearin' their irons on the left hip. So if anybody picked trouble there wasn't no way to tell which one of the Canby's they was dealin' with. Last winter one of the boys was killed draggin' logs down out of the hills for some new cabins at the Two-Bar. He was planted under a headstone that is marked jist plain 'J. Canby.' And the waddy that jist rode uses the same brand identical; which isn't like to discover which one of the Canby's it is that's alive, but they're scared to start anything that would call for a showdown for fear they've bet their money on the wrong card."

"How you got it figured out, Jim?"

Sheriff Bennett bit a huge corner from his tobacco plug. Then he stole a shrewd sidelong glance at Luke Daggert, and caught the quick shift of a pair of dark eyes from behind the hat brim. "One man's guess is as good as another's—mebbe better," continued the grizzled officer as he spat reflectively. "Still, as you observed, left-handed gun throwers is poison."

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LONDON KINGSWOOD

Kidnappers Invade Halfaday

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Trouble on Halfaday," "Secret Service," and Other Stories of Halfaday Creek

Black John's Theory Was That Nothing Discourages Crime Like Taking the Profit out of It. And the Takings Were Good

OLD CUSH set out bottle and glasses, and laid five dice on the bar as Black John Smith entered the doorway of the saloon and trading post known as Cushing's Fort, that ministered to the wants of the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska boundary.

"We'll have to shake 'em by hand this mornin', John," he said. "What with the

boys boisterin' around in here las' night, the box come onsewed. I guess the thread got kind of rotten. I never seen one of them leather dice boxes give out before. I aim to fix it when I git time."

"Jest lay the dice on the back bar, an' I'll buy one," replied Black John.

"You mean—you don't trust me to handle them dice?" asked Cush, a pained expression on his face.

"Listen—you've got every damn cent I own right there in that safe, an' you know the combination, an' I wouldn't lose a wink of sleep worryin' about it, if I was to go away an' stay a year. But shakin' dice fer the drinks is somethin' else. Anyone that kin think up a way to cheat playin' fly loo ain't goin' to shake no dice with me—by hand! When you git the box sewed we'll resume our dice shakin'."

"I seen a piece in that there paper that Red John fetched up from Dawson where it tells about the boxers has uprose over in Chiny, an' all the other Gov'mints is sendin' armies in there to straighten things out. I never heered tell of no Chinee boxers. I see a nigger go ten rounds agin' Thunderbolt McVey down to Frisco, one time—but never no Chinee."

"Oh, shore," replied Black John, "they've got boxers over there—same as any other country. They've turned out some pretty good men, too. You shorely must of heard of that Chinese heavyweight; his name was—let's see—it was Kid Whang Ho. Don't you mind the time he fought Battlin' Ker Chow fer the heavyweight champeenship of—of Borneo?"

"No."

"If you'd take a trip down to Dawson onct in a while where you could see more newspapers, you'd keep better posted. This fight come off last year in—in Hongkong, er Pekin, er some sech place. I rec'lect there was quite a stink about the decision. You see, they had a big purse up—fer them parts. It was a million yen, er mebbe it was sen—anyways it run up to damn near a box car full of them brass checks them Chinamens use fer money, an' the referee give the decision to Kid Whang Ho on a knockout, in the fifth. Battlin' Ker Chow's backers put up a squawk, claimin' their man had got a raw deal on account that Kid Whang Ho's handlers had braided a len'th of lead pipe in his queue——"

"You started in to tell about a prize fight, an' not a pool game," interrupted Cush disgustedly.

"Shore I did. An' I'm still talkin' about one."

"Cripes! Do they lam one another with cues, over there, instead of gloves?"

BLACK JOHN eyed the other with a glance of pity. "Anyone but you would know that a Chinaman's queue is that there twist of hair that hangs down their back. Some calls it their pig tail."

"Why the hell didn't you say so, then?"

"I prefer," retorted Black John loftily, "to call a thing by its proper name, when practical—which is damn seldom, when talkin' to you, bein' as you've got some plebeian nickname fer mighty near everything that's be'n invented to date."

"What's plebeian?"

"Well—like you."

"My pa's fambly was English, an' my ma's folks come from Holland, way back," explained Cush. "But what about the lead pipe in that there Chinee's pig tail?"

"His handlers had braided it in before the fight, so it wouldn't show, an' it give their man a hell of an advantage because when he'd git in a punch to the face, er the body, he'd turn his head quick at the same time, an' that loaded queue would fly around an' ketch Battlin' Ker Chow a hell of a clout in the back of the head, where he didn't have no guard up. It didn't draw no blood, er leave no mark, on account that the hair made a paddin' fer it. A few of them wallops every round up to the fifth, they say, done the business."

Old Cush chuckled. "It was a pretty smart trick, at that. Jest lookin' at a Chinee, you wouldn't think he was smart. But I've heered you've got to watch out fer

'em in a deal. What did they do about it?"

"They took it to court. It seems that the circuit judge held that he couldn't see where a pound er two of lead pipe would overstep the bounds of good clean sportsmanship, so he uphelt the referee's decision. Then, Battlin' Ker Chow's lawyers done some nosin' around an' found out where this jedge had bet a couple of ginrickyshaw loads of yen on Kid Whang Ho."

"What's a ginrickyshaw?"

"It's them two wheeled carts they've got over in Chiny to haul folks home in when they've had too many gin rickeys—'shaw' bein' the Chinee word fer 'wagon.' "

"So they turned this Kid Whang Ho loose, eh?"

"Well, he's out on bail. When his lawyers found out about the jedge havin' that money up on the fight, they appealed the case to the Supreme Court of Chiny."

"But what I can't figger," said Cush, "is why them Chinee boxers should uprise? An' if they did, what would all them other Gov'mints give a damn if they uprose, er not? It don't look like there'd be enough of 'em to cut no figger, one way er another."

"That's because you don't know yer Chiny," replied Black John. "Take a big country like that, where there ain't only two businesses a common man kin go into, an' a hell of a lot of 'em's bound to drift into boxin'——"

"But," interrupted Cush, "why would there only be two businesses?"

"It's your turn to buy a drink," reminded Black John, "an' while yer pourin' it, jest try an' think if you ever know'd a Chinaman to run anythin' but a laundry er a restaurant?"

"N-o-o, I can't say as I have."

SHORE you ain't. An' that's because them two's the only businesses there is in Chiny, so it's the only kind they learnt to run. Course, there's a few of the high-toned ones—mandolins, they call 'em—that exports tea an' silk, but all the rest runs laundries an' restaurants, er depends on boxin' fer a livin'."

"But why should them other countries horn in on it?" persisted Cush. "It looks like they would have troubles of their own, instead of nosin' in on somethin' that happened in Chiny."

"Oh, Gover'ments likes to mess around in one another's business, that-a-way. It gives 'em a chanct to start a war. What happened over there is that the Chinee Supreme Court handed down a adverse decision in the case of Kid Whang Ho vs Battlin' Ker Chow."

"What's that?" asked Cush sourly.

"Why, they reversed the lower court, an' give the fight to Battlin' Ker Chow, on a foul. Immejitly, every damn boxer in Chiny uprose, claimin' that the Gover'ment was interferin' with their onalien rights, inasmuch as there ain't no specific statute agin' braidin' lead pipes in queues. The other Gover'ments got draw'd into the brawl on account that their diplomats all had money bet on the fight. Every last one of them consuls, an' military attachers, an' ministers, had put up real money, one way er another——"

"I didn't know a minister would bet on a prize fight," said Cush.

"These is a different kind of a minister. They ain't preachers, an' they'll bet on anythin'—an' then git their country to go to war about it, if they lose. There wouldn't be practically no wars at all, if they kep' them diplomats to home. The Gover'ments couldn't git together on no issue to fight about."

"Here comes One Armed John," said Cush, setting out another glass. "I wonder if he's found him another corpse?"

"I hope so—things is gittin' kind of dull around here."

"Yeah," agreed Cush with a dour frown, "but them ain't the times he picks to find corpses. It's always either when we're busy with somethin' else, er it's rainin', er snowin', er the mosquitoes is so bad it takes all the satisfaction out of investigatin' 'em."

ONE ARMED JOHN crossed to the bar and filled the empty glass. "There's three new fellas on the crick," he announced. "They're down in Olson's old shack."

"What they doin' down there?" asked Black John.

"They moved in. I was tryin' to snag me a mess of fish out of that deep hole there, an' they come around the bend in a canoe, an' landed on the gravel bar when they seen me. One done all the talkin'. He wants to know if this is Halfaday Crick. I tells him yes, an' then he asks if that there cabin's empty. I says it is, barrin' a table, an' a couple of bunks, an' a bench er two. He wants to know who owns it, an' I tells him a hung man does. I tells him about us hangin' Olson, an' about Stamm gittin' shot by his woman in there, an' how

we figger the cabin's onlucky. He claims that's all the better, 'cause they don't like company, an' I tells him the fort's six mile up the crick, an' he says to hell with the fort, they'll find it if they want it. An' then he goes back to the others, an' they draw'd the canoe up in the bresh, an' begun packin' their stuff to the cabin."

"Went back to the others?" asked Black John. "Wasn't they all right there together?"

"No, they landed on the bar when they seen me, an' this one come over to where I was at, an' he talked kind of low, like he didn't want the rest to hear."

"H-u-m-m, what fer lookin' was they?"

"Well—two of 'em looked about like anyone else, but the other one—him that set in the middle an' didn't do no paddlin'—he was dressed up in store clo's, like a gambler, er a preacher, er someone like that."

"Have any luck fishin'?"

"No, the fish must all be up the crick. I didn't have no luck in them lower bends. I'm goin' on up an' try it there."

"Fetch me a mess," ordered Black John. "I'm gittin' tired of moose meat, an' I ain't got no time to go fishin'."

WHEN the man had gone, the two refilled their glasses, and Old Cush made the proper entry in his day book. "What would a man in store clo's be doin' on Halfaday?" he asked.

"The matter," replied Black John, "gives food fer thought. Admittin' that most men that comes to Halfaday is fleein' from the law, we'll assume that these three is. It's a common thing fer one man to show up here claimin' his name is John Smith, an' there's been instances of two Smith brothers showin' up together. But fer three mismated ones to show up simultaneous is onprecedented."

"What's that mean?" growled Cush. "Why'n hell can't you talk so somebody would onderstand you?"

"It would be a joy," sighed Black John, "to converse with someone which his vocabulary consisted of more than three dozen short words."

"Short words means somethin'," retorted Cush, "an' they're quicker to say. What about them three?"

"Two might be a pardnership—but three's a gang. An' we don't want no gangs on Halfaday."

"I'll say we don't!" agreed Cush. "The last gang that showed up was when they tried to rob the safe—that time we was about to hang 'em all, an' Downey made us quit. But, why would one of 'em have store clo's? An' why would they say to hell with the fort, an' not want no company? They must of know'd that most of the boys here is outlawed, er they wouldn't of come."

"If a man dresses different from the run

of folks, it's a safe bet he is different. If one of a gang was different from the others, we might assume that he was the leader. But from what One Armed told us, sech don't seem to be the case—er he'd done the talkin'. You rec'lect the old sayin' 'Birds of a feather ketches the worm.' It might be that the man in the store clothes is the worm."

"What the hell you talkin' about?" snapped Cush. "Anyone would think you was crazy."

"I fergot," retorted Black John, "that reference to the classics would be practically lost on you. But mebbe you kin grasp this p'int—if them birds don't show up before supper, I'll slip down an' investigate."

II

LATE that evening, as the long twilight slipped into darkness, Black John lay in the edge of the brush that rimmed the little clearing and watched a light flicker, and then glow steadily through the window of Olson's old cabin. The door opened, and a man showed momentarily in the yellow rectangle as he emptied a pan of dishwater. Then it closed again and, slipping silently across the clearing, Black John glued his eye to a lower corner of a window. The man hung up the tin washdish that had served also as a dishpan, and turned to the two others who were seated on a rude bench beside the table. He spoke, and Black John realized with a muttered curse, that the thick log walls and air-tight windows precluded any thought of his overhearing the conversation.

It was as One Armed John had said—two of the men were dressed in flannel shirts, open at the throat, with overalls thrust into the tops of leather pacs. The third wore a brown business suit, and a blue cloth shirt, minus the collar, which had probably been discarded after becoming soiled.

The man who had spoken turned to one of the bunks, rummaged for a moment in a duffel bag, and tossed a pencil and a pad of cheap paper onto the table before the one in the store clothing, who seemed to be protesting. The third one joined in the argument. Evidently they were trying to persuade Brown Suit to write. As he turned slightly Black John saw that he was probably in his early forties, smooth-shaven, save for a week's stubble of beard, and that he seemed defiant, rather than intimidated by the threatening attitude of the others.

The argument continued for some ten minutes before the man reached for the pencil and paper and wrote, while the standing one dictated. When he had finished, the two read the document, and another argument ensued. Evidently the note was not quite to their liking, but the man refused to change it, winding up by pounding the table with his fist to emphasize his defiance.

Black John grinned. "Got plenty of guts, fer the fix he's in," he muttered to himself. "Wonder what they'll do next?"

He was not left long in doubt. Abandoning the argument, one of the two tore the sheet from the pad, pocketed it, and motioning with a jerk of his head, stepped to the door, closely followed by the other.

Instantly Black John flattened himself into the thick weeds at the base of the cabin wall, as his right hand flew to the front of his shirt and grasped the butt of a six-gun. The door opened and closed, and a voice sounded from around the corner of the cabin, not ten feet from where he lay.

"What I claim, we ought to *make* him put that in—beggin' the company to pay over the money. All he says is that we've got him, he's well, but we're threatenin' to knock him off if it ain't paid."

"Listen—you can't *make* a guy like him do nothin'—without you kill him, an' we don't want to do that—yet. What he's wrote is enough, along with what I told 'em in that letter of mine. They'll pay, all right. Hell—didn't we both hear that guy in the Tivoli that night say how this bird was worth a million to the company?

That's what put it in our head to grab him off. They ain't goin' to balk at payin' fifty thousan' to git him back, you kin bet yer life on that. Not when they read my letter, they ain't—where I told 'em how we'd knock him on the head an' sink him in the river if we don't git it.

"You take them two letters down an' slip 'em under the office door, like I told you, an' they'll git 'em next mornin' when they open up, an' that evenin' they'll have that fifty thousan' where I told 'em—an' don't you fergit it."

"But—s'pose they don't do like you said, an' should call the police in? I'd be in a hell of a fix, then—wouldn't I?"

"They won't. I put that acrost to 'em in the letter. You read it—where I told 'em if they let the police in, they'd never see this bird agin. I told 'em how it wouldn't do 'em no good, because the guy that would pick up this package wouldn't know nothin' about where this Chase was hid, nor who had him. He was jest a go-between that couldn't tell 'em nothin'. An' I told 'em that if they done like I said, he'd be back in Dawson inside of a week."

YEAH, it sounds easy. If everythin' works out like you say it'll be okay, an' twenty-five thousan' apiece for a month's work. But how the hell are we goin' to git him back to Dawson? If we turn him loose on Halfaday, he'll go up to Cushing's Fort an' tell 'em what come off, an' then we'll be in a hell of a fix. You know what they claim about this here Black John Smith—he don't stand for crime of any kind on the crick. I'd rather the law caught us than him. He'd hang us shore as hell—an' the law would only jail us. We've got to hit for the outside after this job or this guy might spot us sometime. Black John might catch up to us before we could make it. They claim he's hell on the trail—an' hell on wheels when it comes to hangin' folks."

"Choke off!" growled the other. "I don't aim to run foul of this here Black John, or the law either. When you get that dough, you hustle back here an' we'll knock this guy on the head an' sink him in that deep hole where that one armed gent was fishin'. Then we'll be outside 'fore anyone starts huntin' him. They'll be waitin' in Dawson for him to show up."

"Good God!" exclaimed the other. "You don't mean murder him? Double-cross him after we've got the money?"

"The hell! I don't! We've got ourselves to look out for—not him! If we knock him off, we're safe. If we don't, we never will be safe. A guy like him don't forget."

"I—I hadn't thought of that," said the other.

"There's a hell of a lot of things that I can think of that you can't. You play along with me, an' you'll be safe. Get to bed now. You'll be hittin' for Dawson at daylight. You ought to be back in two weeks."

THE door opened and closed as the two reëntered the cabin, and Black John got to his feet, slipped from the clearing, and struck out through the darkness on the familiar foot-trail to Cushing's Fort.

As he entered the saloon about midnight Old Cush set out a bottle and glasses. A stud game was in progress at a table across the room, but there was nobody at the bar as Black John took his accustomed place and filled his glass.

"What did you find out?" asked Cush, pouring his own drink.

"Well, it's jest like I was tellin' you, Cush—about the birds of a feather ketchin' the worm."

"Still quotin' them scriptures, eh? It looks like after a man got to your age he'd have some sense."

"There's a lot of common sense in them old sayin's—if a man ponders 'em," answered Black John. "I rec'lect another one that says how it's a long worm that's got no turnin'. Drink up, an' I'll buy one."

"Which that's the first sensible word you've spoke sence you come in," observed Cush, as he entered the drinks against Black John's tab, and refilled his glass. "An' now when you git that one throw'd

into you, mebbe you'll tell me what you found out about them three fellas that One Armed was tellin' us about?"

"Oh—them fellas. Hell, they're nice enough boys—from what I seen of 'em. They'll mind their own business, an' not bother no one. Me, I'm goin' off on a little prospectin' trip. Be gone mebbe a couple of weeks—mebbe even a month."

"Prospectin' trip. Did you hear tell of a new strike er somethin'?"

"No. Jest playin' a hunch. There might not be nothin' to it."

III

EARLY the following morning Black John struck out through the hills on a trail that took him to Ladue Creek. Obtaining a canoe from an Indian, he headed down the creek, well knowing that he would thus arrive in Dawson a full day ahead of the kidnapper.

After a few drinks in the Tivoli with the sourdoughs, he strolled over to the headquarters of the Northwest Mounted Police to be cordially greeted by Corporal Downey.

"Hello, John. How's things on Halfaday?"

"Everythin's fine as frog hair—far as I know. It was a little dull on the crick, so I come down fer a game of stud with the boys, an' to git a newspaper fer Old Cush, so he kin keep up with the war. A newspaper lasts him a couple of weeks. He reads every damn thing that's printed in 'em—even the advertisements. It gives him somethin' to chaw about fer the next month. How's things in the ranks of the sinful? They keepin' you busy?"

"It's been pretty quiet along the river, till a couple of weeks ago. Then the general manager of Consolidated Mines Ltd. disappeared an' we've been huntin' all over hell fer him, ever since."

"Disappeared, eh? Took about half the assets of the company along with him, I s'pose?"

"Hell no! Not that kind of a disappearance, at all. He just disappeared—dropped out of sight—vanished. It's a case of now you see him; an' now you don't see him. He disappeared right here in Dawson."

"Prob'ly got drunk an' fell in the river," hazarded Black John.

"Not a chance. He wasn't a booze-fighter. He's a high grade man in every way, an' a damn fine fellow, to boot. He'd take a drink, now an' then—but that's all. His wife is damn near crazy."

"A lot of wimmin is," observed Black John. "That's mebbe why he skipped out."

"No, no! I mean, she's damn near crazy worryin' about his disappearance. She was all right before that. I sure hope we can locate him—more fer her sake, than the Consolidated's. A company can always find a new manager."

"Yeah, an' a widder kin always find a new husband, too," grinned Black John. "Remember that old sayin'—there's a sucker born every minute."

"You don't care much for the ladies, do you, John?" remarked Corporal Downey.

"Not them, nor the leprosy, neither. Even one of 'em on a crick kin raise more hell than an ice jam. So you don't figger this fella skipped out, eh?"

"What reason would he have? The Consolidated was payin' him a big salary. He was happily married to a mighty fine woman. He had plenty of friends. Why should a man like that disappear voluntarily?"

"Not only why should he? But how could he? Who seen him last? An' where?"

HE AN' Blair, the president of the Consolidated, an' some of their foremen held some kind of a meetin' in the company office that lasted till about midnight, an' when it busted up, they all stopped in the Tivoli fer a couple of drinks. Chase, that's this manager's name, he only took one drink, an' then he started fer home, leavin' the others at the bar. An' that's the last anyone ever seen of him. The next mornin' they reported the disappearance to us,

an' believe me, we've been busy ever since. So far, we haven't got a damn thing to show fer it."

"What did this here labor of yours consist of?" asked Black John. "Do you figger he was murdered?"

"We did, at first. We couldn't find any motive, though. Chase didn't have any money on him, to speak of. We can't find that he had an enemy in the world. The foreman did all the hirin' an' firin', so it don't stand to reason it was a personal grudge. Considerin' all them facts, we switched over to a kidnappin' theory. But now it begins to look like a murder agin."

"Why?"

"Well, the Consolidated furnished us all the men we wanted, an' we've scoured every place a man could be hidden within fifty miles of Dawson, or so we think. Besides that, we've searched every buildin' in camp, regardless of who owns it er what it's used fer. The same goes fer Forty Mile, an' we even searched every tepee an'

shack in Moosehide. It's two weeks since he disappeared, an' if he'd be'n kidnapped it looks like whoever done it would have got in touch with someone before this, to try an' collect a reward fer turnin' him loose. I'm afraid someone knocked him on the head an' throwed him in the river."

"What was his gamblin' status? Did he owe someone more'n he could pay? Er did someone owe him more'n they could?"

"He didn't gamble."

BLACK JOHN shook his head. "It don't sound reasonable anyone would knock off someone as prominent as him, without no motive, when it's a cinch there'd be a big stink raised about it. Course, if you could go clean on back through his past you might find motives enough fer half a dozen murders, an' the chances is they'd all be wimmin—him not favorin' neither whiskey nor cards. But disregardin' that an' gittin' back to kidnappin', why would they pick out a man workin' on a salary, when it's a well know'd fact that there's at least a dozen men in Dawson that rates better'n a million in dust? Besides, there's Blair, the president of the Consolidated. Why wouldn't they grab him instead of jest the manager?"

Downey grinned. "If this is a kidnappin', whoever done it knows that Chase is worth a damn sight more to the company than Blair is. Blair's a capitalist—Chase is an engineer. Blair draws down his share of the dividends that Chase makes the property earn for him an' the rest of the stockholders. They'd pay to get Chase back—an' accordin' to Blair, they stand ready to pay plenty—an' no questions asked. The company needs him, an' needs him bad.

"As fer the kidnappers grabbin' off any of the sourdoughs that have got a million in dust—who'd pay to git 'em back? They none of 'em have families. An' no company needs 'em. The other sourdoughs might—but the kidnappers would never get away with it. Them sourdoughs would be too damn tough to handle."

Black John rose from his chair and knocked the dottle from his pipe. "Guess I'll drop over to the Tivoli an' horn into a stud game. Yer reasonin' seems sound about this here bein' a kidnappin'. Leastwise, it's sounder'n to figger it fer a murder. As fer not hearin' from the kidnappers, I wouldn't worry about that, yet. They'd be damn fools to try to git in touch with the company when you've got the hills full of men huntin' 'em."

"The men have been out of the hills fer five er six days. We saw it wasn't gettin' us nowhere."

"Someone'll prob'ly be hearin' from 'em,

when the stink dies down," opined Black John. "So long. I'm runnin' behind with my stud."

IV

ON THE second morning thereafter, Black John again appeared in the doorway of Corporal Downey's office.

"'Aw revaw,' as the Frenchies say. I'm on my way fer Halfaday! By God—there's a rhyme! Sometime, when I git drunk enough, I'll make me up a song, an' start it out like that."

"I'd give a dollar not to hear it," grinned Downey sourly.

"An' you'd be gittin' off cheap, at that," chuckled Black John. "Stud is more in my line. You'd ort to seen me take 'em, las' night! They kind of got me, the night before—but I more'n evened up on 'em. I took one pot off'n Old Bettles that he never will quit mournin' about. This pot had got pretty big, what with three, four of 'em raisin', an' me jest trailin' along. Bettles, he winds up with a pair of kings, an' an ace, an' a deuce showin'. I'm settin' behind a jack, an' a ten spot, an' a pair of deuces, the second one of which was the last card I ketched. Someone outs with a bet, an' Bettles h'ists, an' I h'ists him. The others drops out an' he h'ists me back, havin' him an ace in the hole to make two pair. His deuce bein' the first card he'd ketched, was exposed all the time, an' he didn't figger I'd be damn fool enough to stand them raises with a deuce in the hole. When the smoke blow'd away you'd ort to heard him cuss! It would done yer soul good! Next time you see him, jest ask him what aces up is worth in a stud game?

"What the hell you so glum about? Someone hand you a wooden nickel?"

"I'll say they did!" replied Downey. "The Consolidated heard from them kidnappers."

"Well cripes, now you got somethin' to work on!"

"That's the way I wish it was—but it ain't."

"Didn't they leave no note, nor nothin'?"

"Yeah, they left two of 'em. One from them, statin' their terms, an' givin' instructions about turnin' over the money, an' another from Chase, tellin' about him bein' all right, so fer, but he would git bumped off if the money wasn't paid. They agreed to deliver him inside a week."

"Well—that's fair enough, ain't it? All you got to do is to put a good man on the job, an' foller that money."

"Yeah—an' that's jest what we can't do," growled Downey. "Yesterday mornin', when they opened up the Consolidated office, they found them two notes on the floor, where they'd be'n shoved under the door. The kidnappers demanded fifty thousan' in old bills, er gold. It had to be delivered by one man in a canoe, er a row boat, an' left on the end of that rocky point, about a mile downriver, on the other side. The man was to make the delivery between nine an' ten in the evenin', an' he wasn't to try an' see no one, but must lay the package down, step into the boat, an' come back acrost the river.

"The note said that if the police was notified er anyone tried to follow the money in any way, it would be the last anyone would ever see of Chase. They claimed that the man that would pick up the money didn't know anything about where Chase was bein' held, er who had him—so it wouldn't do us no good, even if we followed him.

"When Blair showed Mrs. Chase the notes, they talked it over an' decided to pay the money, an' follow instructions to the letter without lettin' the police know anything about it. But Mrs. Chase knew we were workin' on the case, an' she was afraid we might pick up this bird with the money an' spill the beans, so she an' Blair come over here an' begs me to lay off the case till Chase gets back.

"I can see her angle, all right—but it puts me in a hell of a spot. With the Inspector away, an' no way to reach him, how do I know he won't call it connivin' in a crime er somethin' an' bust me? If it had been only Blair, I might of held out fer

tryin' to nab 'em, but the woman was so sure that anything we'd do would cause 'em to murder Chase, that I give in, an' called the boys off. An' I ain't so sure she ain't right, at that.

"The note said he'd be returned within a week, but they begged fer three extry days, in case of a hitch of some kind, so I promised that the police would lay off till Chase returned, providin' he done so within ten days. I hate to give them damn crooks a break like that. But I'd hate to be bull headed about it, an' cause 'em to murder Chase, too."

"Yeah, it does kind of put you on the spot," agreed Black John. "I s'pose, then, they went ahead an' delivered the money?"

"Yes. They followed instructions to the letter. A Consolidated man took the package over an' left it on that point last evenin'. He was back here a little after ten."

"Did he see the fella that was to git it?"

"He didn't see anyone—no boat, no canoe, nothin'. He jest left the package on the end of the point, an' come on back acrost the river."

BLACK JOHN was silent for a moment. "Course," he said, "the main thing is to git this here Chase back. Fifty thousan' ain't nothin' to a big company like the Consolidated. I don't grieve none over their loss. They're takin' a hell of a lot out of this country. What they spend here in the way of wages an' supplies, ain't a drop in the bucket to what they take out. An' when they skin every crick right down to bed rock, they'll go hunt some other country to rape. If them crooks is smart enough to sting 'em fer fifty thousan', it's all right with me. But Chase is somethin' else agin. Now that the money's been paid, he's got a right to be turned loose. I'll keep my eyes open, an' if I run onto him—like if they had him hid on Halfaday er somethin', I'll see that he gits back safe."

"Do you suspect that he's on Halfaday?" asked Downey, eyeing the other sharply.

"I don't suspect nothin'. If he's there, I'll see that he gits back—that's all. What fer lookin' fella is he, in case I'd run onto him?"

Reaching into a drawer, Downey withdrew a photograph and tossed it onto the desk. "There's his picture. He stands five foot eight, weighs around a hundred an' sixty—blue eyes, brown hair. If you could run onto 'em an' hold those crooks for me it would be great!"

Black John laughed. "Nothin' doin'. I ain't in the crook holdin' business. Fer all of me, someone could slip up an' steal that two million dollar dredge off the company some night, an' I'd never shed a damn tear. I got Halfaday to look out fer. These Yukon River sins lay easy on my conscience."

"I don't believe they're on Halfaday," said Downey. "In the first place, if they are, they couldn't possibly return Chase to Dawson within a week. It would take at least two weeks. Then if they had him upriver, why would they want the money delivered a mile or more downriver? Besides, it's pretty well known, down here, that you don't stand for any crime on Halfaday, an' that you're pretty rough with anyone that tries to pull somethin' off. They'd be afraid up there you might consider holdin' a man fer ransom, a crime, an' hang 'em."

"Such fear would be groundless," grinned Black John. "The crime, as I see it, is in the snatchin', an' not in the holdin'. It's clearly your case, Downey. The man was grabbed off in Dawson." He stood up and retrieved his sack from the floor. "Well, so long. I've got to be gittin' back so Cush kin find out how this here Chinee war is comin'."

V

PROCEEDING to the river, Black John swung his pack into the canoe, stowing his rifle, and a pair of binoculars conveniently to hand, and pushed off.

"Situated the way I be," he mused, half

aloud, as he paddled steadily upstream, keeping close to the bank to take advantage of slack water and eddies, "a man is kind of put to it to know what's right. Them two fellas grabbin' off Chase like that, fer to horn fifty thousan' out of a big company like the Consolidated savors of bad ethics, an' even viewed liberally, should be at least, a tort. But they've got a livin' to make, an' a man's got to think of that, too.

"The man that come down to git the money mightn't be a bad sort of a guy, but the other one—the one that figgers on double-crossin' 'em, an' knockin' Chase on the head, an' sinkin' him in the crick—he's reprehensible to a hangin' extent. On Halfaday, it's our duty to deal stern with buzzards like him. An' yet, he ain't committed no murder till he kills Chase, an' it don't seem right to let him go ahead an' kill him, jest so we could hang him fer it. But on the other hand, there ain't no reasonable doubt that he ort to be hung. It puts me in a kind of a condiment to know jest what to do. Lookin' at it from a strickly moral angle, as a preacher would say, neither one of them two should be allowed to make a profit out of a crime like kidnappin'. Nothin' discourages crime like takin' the profit out of it—an' that's the theory I'm goin' on."

Settling to the work, he bent his paddle, pausing from time to time to scan the river ahead for sight of another canoe. It was well toward evening when he picked it up, hugging the opposite shore, possibly a mile in advance. When twilight deepened into dusk, he crossed the river and camped. "Dastn't crowd him too clost on the big river," he muttered, "he might see me. After we hit the White an' Halfaday, where the bends is closter together, I kin shorten up on him. I've got to git there before they knock Chase off."

ALL the next day and the day following, Black John paddled on, content to keep the man within range of his glass. At noon of the third day, as the preceding canoe reached the mouth of the White River, he focused the glass, and his jaw dropped in astonishment. For, instead of heading up the White, the man ahead swung nearly to the middle of the Yukon to avoid the outrushing current of the White, and, paddling furiously, he slanted again toward shore above the mouth of the smaller river.

The gape of astonishment gave place to a broad grin as Black John returned his glass to its case. "I'll be damned if he ain't goin' right on up the Yukon!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Yes, sir—double-crossin' his pardner, an' hittin' fer the outside with that fifty thousan'. By Cripes, if it ain't almost enough to make a man lose faith in human nature to see how folks carries on! Sech acts puts him in the same cattygory with the other one—they're both of 'em damn crooks! It's shore time someone stepped in an' taught 'em both a lesson in common rectitude."

Familiarity with the river allowed Black John to navigate the cross current at the mouth of the White without swinging wide and thus possibly exposing himself to the other's view. An hour later he watched through his glass as the man beached his canoe well above the mouth of the White, and when a thin plume of smoke told that he was preparing his midday meal, Black John paddled to within a hundred yards of the beached canoe, landed, and crept noiselessly through the scrub bushes, loosening a couple of buttons in the front of his shirt, as he went.

PICKING up his teapot, the man left his fire and walked to the water's edge. When he returned a moment later, the pot of water dropped from his hand and rolled among the rocks, as he stared wide-eyed into the keen gray eyes of the huge figure that stood beside the fire.

"I'm Black John Smith," announced the figure, "from Halfaday Crick."

"Oh—er—sure—I—I've heard you spoke of," the man paused awkwardly as his glance flashed to the pack that lay

near the fire. "Have you—a—et?" he asked hurriedly. "I was jest goin' to cook me up a boilin' of tea. I—I kind of spilt my water, I guess."

"It looks like a good guess," observed Black John.

"I didn't expect to—to see anyone. It kind of give me a start. I'll get some more."

"There ain't no hurry," replied Black John easily. "Where you headin'?"

"Who—me? Why—I'm headin'—that is, I'm goin' outside. I'm sick of the damn country."

"Outside, eh? That's funny. The way yer pardner talked, he was kind of expectin' you back on Halfaday."

The blood receded slowly from the man's face, leaving it pasty white. "My—my

pardner," he gasped. "Halfaday! There must be some mistake. I ain't got no pardner—an' I never seen Halfaday."

"You lie natural; but not at all convincin'," replied Black John. "An' yer skippin' out with that fifty thousan' that the Consolidated paid over constitutes the crime of skullduggery, which you'll find out is hangable, when you git back to the crick."

"Good God!" cried the man, his eyes staring in terror. "I've heard how you hang men on Halfaday. I told that damn fool we better keep away from there!"

"Yer judgment was sound."

"But you wouldn't hang me fer—fer double-crossin' him, would you? Listen! I'll tell you why I was runnin' out on him—an' it's the God's truth! He figgered on knockin' Chase on the head jest as quick as I got back with the money! He never intended to turn him loose! I wouldn't be in on no murder—so I beat it!"

"Jest fleein' from temptation, eh? Well, you'll be give the chanct to put that in as a mitigatin' circumstance at the hangin'. Mebbe the boys'll believe it. You can't never tell. It would be more convincin', though, if you wasn't packin' that fifty thousan' along with you. To a casual observer the transaction savors of theft. Throw yer stuff in yer canoe. We'll cache mine. Me an' you's headin' fer Halfaday."

THE man's whole body was trembling, and his words came jerkily between lips stiff with terror, "Oh, my God! Don't take me up there an' hang me! I ain't done nothin' to git hung fer!"

"Yer guilty of the crime of extortion by means of kidnappin,' of the larceny of fifty thousan' dollars, of double-crossin' yer pardner, to say nothin' of such minor infringements as lyin', an' not brushin' yer teeth. We've hung dozens of men fer less."

"Listen," cried the man suddenly. "Take half of this fifty thousan'—an' fergit you ever seen me!"

"You mean—accept a bribe? Me—Black John Smith! Yer offerin' to bribe *me* to save yer own dirty neck from gittin' stretched?" Black John's voice rose to a bellow, as the thoroughly terrified man shrank back from the glare of the outraged gray eyes. "By God, yer pilin' sin upon sin till it's doubtful if one rope'll hold 'em all! Besides which, yer tryin' to make me a party to the crime of kidnappin'!"

"I didn't mean to bribe you—honest, I didn't! Take it all. Take every lousy dollar of it. Give it to the pore; give it back to the company, do whatever you want to with it——"

"That's more like it," said Black John, combing at his beard with his fingers. "It

shows that possibly there's a glimmerin' of rectitude left yet in under that sin-blistered hide."

"I know I done wrong," cried the man, "an' I want to square it! Don't hang me, let me go. Let me git out of this damn country, which I wisht to God I'd never saw in the first place. I got a wife an' three children back home, an' there ain't no one but me to look after 'em!"

There was a softening of Black John's gray eyes. "A wife an' children, eh? An' no one to look after 'em. That puts an entirely different light on the matter. The chances is, they might miss you if we was to hang you. A man hadn't ort to let nothin' interfere with duty—but I'm sentimental that-a-way. If I was to forego this hangin', would you promise to leave the country?"

"Sure, I'll leave it. I never want to see it agin. Here's the money—take it, an' leave me go! It's all in there—count it."

FUMBLING in his pack, the man produced a thick package wrapped in heavy brown paper, and tossed it to Black John, who deliberately removed the wrapping and counted the bills.

"It's all here," he announced, pointing to it as he was about to rewrap it. "Look at it. Don't it make you ashamed of yerself, when you think what you've stooped to, jest fer a bunch of dirty pieces of paper? It ort to, if it don't! Let this be a lesson to you the next time yer tempted. Remember this, my good man—honesty is the best policy. If a man heeds them old sayin's, he won't go fer wrong. Throw yer stuff in yer canoe now—an' git a-goin' before that there sentiment of nine peters out."

The man complied with alacrity, and as he shoved off and headed upriver, Black John waved to him from the bank.

"So long, an' good luck! Give my regards to yer wife an' them three children. An' treat 'em good, from now on—remember, they saved yer life!"

VI

FIVE days later Black John drew his canoe into the brush at the big bend, just below Olson's old cabin. Cutting a slender sapling, he drew a fish line from his pocket, tied it to the end of the pole, dabbled the line in the water till it was wet, and wrapping it carelessly about the pole, sauntered into the Olson clearing, his improvised fishing outfit in his hand.

At a glance from a man seated on a chopping block, another, who had been seated in the doorway, arose and disappeared into the cabin, leaving the door open behind him.

"Fishin'?" asked the man perfunctorily, without rising from the block.

"Yeah, I thought a mess of fish would go good, when I git home. I live up the crick a piece, near the tradin' post. Been down to Dawson. By the way, I see yer pardner's quittin' you. Have a row er somethin'?"

"My pardner? What do you mean—pardner?"

"Why, that other fella that was with you that day you hit Halfaday an' was askin' One Armed John about this here cabin. Me an' One Armed was fishin' down here that day, an' I was a couple of bends down when you passed. I drawed back behind some bresh where you wouldn't see me when you went by. There was three of you—you, an' this other guy, an' another one with a suit of brown store clothes on, settin' in the middle. I jest seen Brown Suit step into the cabin. It was the other guy I seen down on the river. He claimed he was hittin' fer the outside, so I——"

"The outside!" yelled the man, leaping to his feet, and glaring into Black John's face. "Where'd you see him? What did he say? What do you mean—the outside?"

Black John frowned. "There ain't no call to git excited about it, fer as I kin see. All I said was that this here fella is hittin' fer the outside. Anyways, that's

what he claimed. He seemed kind of nervous like—as though he was in a hurry. He didn't know me no more than you did. He'd camped there at the mouth of the White to cook him up a b'ilin' of tea, an' I was paddlin' up from Dawson, an' it bein' about noon, I landed. We kind of got to talkin', an' he said he was hittin' fer the outside. He thought I was jest some prospector from along the river. When I told him I was headin' fer Halfaday, was when he got in such a sweat. He told me not to tell no one that I seen him—nor where he was goin'. How could I tell 'em, when I don't even know his name? Course, you an' him bein' pardners, that's different—I thought you'd like to know. He pulled out 'fore I did, an' the last I seen of him, he was paddlin' like hell up the Yukon."

CURSING like a maniac, the man leaped for the cabin. Following him, Black John paused in the doorway, and watched in well feigned surprise as he threw grub and blankets into his pack, while the man in the brown suit sat on the edge of a bunk and watched the proceeding with interest.

"What the hell ails you?" asked Black John, as the man dashed past him, pack sack in one hand, rifle in the other, and headed for the canoe that lay bottom upward on the bank of the creek.

"I'll catch that double-crossin' skunk! An' I'll fill him so full of holes he'll look like a second hand punch board! Damn him! I'll follow him clean around the world, an' I won't give him a chance to open his yap when I catch him, either!"

"It's ondoubtless somethin' important," grinned Black John, as the man shoved off. "Don't tell him I mentioned seein' him. But you'll have to hurry. It was five days ago I seen him, an' like I said—he seemed in a hell of a hurry."

As the canoe shot around a bend and disappeared from view, Black John turned to find the man in the brown suit at his side.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "damn if I hadn't fergot all about you! It kind of looks like he had, too. What's the matter with him? Gone crazy er somethin'?"

"Crazy man," grinned the man. "The fact is, this other fellow is making off with fifty thousand dollars that should have been divided between them."

"Tch, tch, tch—well, what do you know about that! You mean, he's *stealin'* this money? An' how about you? Ain't you in on it, too? You was in pardners with 'em, wasn't you?"

THE man's grin widened. "Well—hardly. You see, they kidnapped me, and were holding me for a fifty thousand dollar ransom. That other chap went to Dawson to collect it."

"Kidnapped, eh? Ransom? Say—it can't be that you're this here Chase that Corporal Downey was tellin' me about—general manager of the Consolidated, er somethin'?"

"I'm the man. So the police have been active in the matter, eh?"

"No—an' that's the hell of it, accordin' to Downey. They was fer a while. They hunted all over hell fer you, an' then the Consolidated got a couple of letters, which said how if the police tried to foller the one who got the money, they'd knock you off, an' no one ever would know what become of you. So between yer wife an' Blair, they managed to hold the police off till you git back, er at least fer ten days after payment of the money. So—you're Chase, eh? Well—I'll be damned!"

"Yes, I'm Chase. And it's all owing to you that I'm safe and sound. I didn't trust that fellow that stayed to guard me—not for a minute. I don't believe he ever intended to turn me loose. If the other had returned with the money, they'd have knocked me on the head rather than leave me alive to identify them if they were ever caught."

"He did look a mite ontrustworthy, at that," admitted Black John. "An' the way

things turned out, the other one proved himself thoroughly so. It looks like you was in bad company all right. It's jest as well to be shet of 'em."

"How am I to reach Dawson?" asked the man. "Can't you take me there?" As Black John hesitated, the man continued: "I haven't the least idea where I am, but I know it's a long way from the number of days we traveled. They kept me blindfolded till we hit this small river. I hate to ask a man who's just made the trip to turn right around and make it again. But, I'll make it worth your while."

"It ain't that," replied Black John. "If I take you back it won't cost you a cent. Me an' Old Cush try an' keep Halfaday moral, an' it would be extremely onethical to charge a man money fer a simple favor of that kind."

"Halfaday! Is this Halfaday Creek? And by any chance, are you Black John Smith?"

"Well, it might be called chance," grinned the other. "I prefer to think it was design."

"I've heard of you, and the rather—er, drastic methods you sometimes employ in keeping the creek free from crime."

"Yeah, we don't want no crime on Halfaday. You see, Chase, it's like this—most of us up here are outlawed, fer one reason er another, an' we don't want the police snoopin' around. My own malfeasance was the h'istin' of an Army payroll off'n a major an' three common soldiers, over on the Alasky side. I was younger then, an' more thoughtless. I kin see now that it was a crude piece of work, at best—an' if you come right down to splittin' hairs, the ethics of it is open to question. But this major had throw'd his brag about never losin' no money of all the thousan's he'd handled till someone jest nach'lly had to take him—an' it might as well of been me.

"The reason I'm in this quandry about takin' you to Dawson, is that it might look to some folks as if I was in on the deal. There's nothin' on me, on the Yukon side, but rememberin' that Alasky job, there might be some folks that would think that I'd stoop so low as to share the profits of a venture of this kind—when, God knows—I wouldn't share 'em with any body!"

CHASE laughed. "Don't let that bother you for a minute! No one could have the slightest suspicion that you had anything to do with it—except that you rescued me from clutches of the men that were holding me. I'll attend to that. I overheard every word that passed between you and the man who was guarding me—and I can vouch for the fact that you stumbled on this affair purely by accident."

"In such case, I'll go back with you. It would be a tough trip fer you to make alone, an'——"

"I'm in no shape to attempt it," interrupted the other. "I've been under a great mental and nervous strain, believing as I did, that these men intended to murder me."

"All right. Throw yer stuff together. It wasn't jest exactly by accident, I found you, at that. I promised Downey I'd keep my eyes open, an' see that you got back safe, if you was on Halfaday. I'll be back with the canoe in a few minutes. I'm goin' to cache part of my stuff—there ain't no use in haulin' nothin' around the country you don't need on the trip."

Chase was waiting on the bank when Black John returned. "Throwing my stuff together, as you suggested," he grinned, "consisted in finding my shoes and putting them on. You see, they didn't give me time to make any extensive preparations for the trip. After we got here they hid my shoes, knowing I suppose, that I couldn't go far in a rock country like this without 'em."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to travel fer barefoot in this country. Climb in the front there—an' we'll git goin'."

VII

CORPORAL DOWNEY looked up from his desk to stare inquiringly at the unkempt, stubble-bearded figure in the rumpled brown suit that paused, smiling, in the doorway of his office. Suddenly, he leaped from his chair and crossed the room at a bound.

"Chase!" he cried. "Good God, Mr. Chase—is it really you?"

"What's left of me," grinned the man, as from behind him came the booming voice of Black John:

"I told you I'd fetch him back if he was on Halfaday!"

"Come on in," said the officer, "an' tell me about it. The ten days' truce has expired, an' I've had men out huntin' you

for two days." He seated himself at his desk, and indicated a couple of chairs.

"Let's get it over with as soon is possible," said Chase. "I want to go home and let my wife know I'm safe."

"You don't look safe," grinned Black John. "She'll shore have to take yer word fer it."

The man chuckled, and beginning with his seizure in Dawson, told briefly of the long canoe trip, of his confinement in the cabin on Halfaday, and of his rescue by Black John, who happened on the cabin while fishing.

"Fishin', eh?" asked Downey, his eyes on Black John's face. "Did you catch anything?"

"No. They wasn't bitin' good that day. I didn't git none. But I might of, if I hadn't of run onto them two at the cabin."

"Can I go now?" asked Chase. "You know where to find me if you should want any further information."

"Jest a minute," replied Downey, his eyes on Black John's guileless face. "I didn't quite get the straight of this. You say John told this kidnapper that he had talked to his pardner down at the mouth of the White, an' that the man had gone on upriver, sayin' he was goin' outside?"

"Yes, that's what infuriated the fellow. He cursed and raved like a maniac as he collected his effects for pursuit."

"All right, Mr. Chase, you kin go now. I may want to question you later," said Downey, and when the man had gone, he faced Black John. For several moments he sat, his eyes on the big man's face, as he slowly drew the smooth shaft of his penholder back and forth between his fingers.

"How did you know that man on the river, was a pardner of the one you found later guardin' Chase at Olson's cabin?" he asked abruptly.

"Who—me? How did I know they was pardners? Hell, Downey, I didn't know it! That is, I never seen no pardnership papers, all draw'd up, signed, sealed and delivered, as a lawyer would say. I jest guessed it."

"How could you guess a thing like that?"

"Well—by puttin' three an' two together, you might say. I seen them three on Halfaday on my way down to Dawson, an' bein' kind of mismated—Chase, lookin' different than the other two—I kind of wondered who they was, an' what they was doin' there. Them two, lookin' about of a stripe, I nach'ly figgered they was pardners. It was the third man's status that bothered me."

DOWNEY frowned. "Then when I told you about the kidnappin', right here in this room, you knew damn well who he was—an' never said a word about it!"

Black John shook his head. "I didn't know no sech a damn thing," he replied. "Git out that picture you showed me, an' see if it looks anythin' like Chase does now. He's a good lookin' man. The one I seen at Olson's cabin looked like a bum. As a matter of fact, Downey—what you told me did set me wonderin' if it mightn't be him. That's why I stopped there goin' back, an' pretended to be fishin'. I wanted to git a good look at him. You know damn well I don't stand fer no crime on Halfaday—an' if one was bein' perpetrated I wanted to nip it in the bud, as a poet would say—an' I done so."

"You should have told me about those three men, an' we could have gone up there an' nailed them two kidnappers as easy as fallin' off a log—an' saved the Consolidated that fifty thousan'."

"That's ondoubtless true," admitted Black John, "but you know, Downey, I ain't a man that would be runnin' down here squealin' on folks. There's been times when you've come onto the crick that I've mebbe give you some help, when I deemed the occasion demanded it—an' there'll prob'ly be other sech times. But as fer me comin' down here to headquarters out of a clear sky an' deliberately squawkin' on someone—it's jest one of them things I don't do. I ain't no policeman. An' it don't seem to irk me a damn bit that the Consolidated lost that fifty thousan'."

"Where's that fifty thousan' now?" asked Downey abruptly.

"Your guess would be as good as mine," replied Black John suavely.

"I've got my damn good guess," said the corporal.

"You an' me—both," retorted Black John. "But I couldn't prove it."

A SLOW grin twitched the corners of Corporal Downey's mouth. "Yeah," he drawled dryly. "That's my fix, too. It's too bad you let that fellow git on upriver with that fifty thousan', John. You knew that it had been paid over to him."

"Shore I know'd it. That's why I hurried so to ketch up to him. If I had, mebbe the Consolidated would of got their money back. But I didn't. I never seen hide nor hair of him. I figgered he was ahead of me all the way up to Halfaday. Then, when I come out in the clearin' at Olson's shack an' seen he hadn't got back with the money, I know'd damn well he'd never turned up the White with it—he'd double-crossed his pardner, an' kep' right on upriver. Tryin' like I do, to keep Halfaday moral, I didn't want no sech a damn cuss on the crick as this kidnapper, so I done some quick thinkin', an' told him I'd saw his pardner, an' how he was hittin' fer the outside. I figgered he'd take out after him—an' he did. I figger when he ketches him, he'll shoot him—an' he will."

Corporal Downey's grin widened. "You do a hell of a lot of quick thinkin', don't you, John?"

"Shore I do. By God, a man's got to —to keep a crick moral! An' besides, it pays. I promised you that if Chase was on Halfaday, I'd fetch him back—an' I did. 'It's a wise ox, Downey, that kin become a father.' A man's got to heed them old sayin's—an' you know damn well I always work hand in glove with the police."

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WEST

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